

Sunsunsun

Illustrated by
Momoco

11

Alya

Sometimes Hides Her

Feelings in
Russian

Fan TL

by
Glucose
Translations



незапно

Кокет

Алиса

иногда скрывает свои чувства в русском фан-тре

неожиданно

кокет

по

неожиданно

кокет



“Ayano! Great work
on the spy operation!”

“Good job. Make sure
to rest well today.”



“...Onee... -chan.”

“That’s riiight!
I am your Onee-chan,
Alya-chaaan!”

“O-oh, you
guys sure
are looking
really close,
huh....?”



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The mini
inhabitants
of Alya's heart.

These li'l companions always
seem to multiple in
response to her
"love."

Alya Sometimes Hides Her Feelings In Russian Volume 11 Fan Translation

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We are a small nonprofit fan translation group, consisting solely of a group of friends taking on the roles of translators, accuracy checkers, editors, and proofreaders.

Our operation mainly involves hand translating, with machine translators used only solely as minor pieces of reference material and structural guides (whether it be ChatGPT, DeepL, Papago; no difference when it comes to how we do things, really). We take the tedious effort to analyze and reference the original JP texts line by line, phrase by phrase, and often character by character, in order to build our own translation from the ground up that conveys all nuances from the original text accurately.

Paired with the use of English creative writing skills (all of our main staff members are native speakers with strong academic/literary backgrounds), our approach strives to find the sweet balance between localization and foreignization, localizing phrases, references, and proverbs/idioms where accuracy of nuances can be maintained, while opting to keep unique and culturally distinctive cases, and going for a mix of both when it works.

We proudly claim our methodology and grueling efforts result in translations that read more naturally rather than robotically or ESL-like, with nuances within narration and dialogue conveyed distinctly and accurately, making characters true to their original tones rather than sounding all the same, bland, or inaccurate: a common issue found in most barely edited/tweaked ChatGPT translations (or other MTL slop/spam).

For more information about the difference between a proper translation and MTL spam/slop (or ones done by an ESL speaker), please read [this document](#). If you care about our translations, or light novels in general, then ***please contribute to our cause by spreading this document and message as far as possible***. Together, we can raise awareness, inform the ignorant, and ensure that the light novel fan translating community becomes a more transparent space: one that prioritizes reader comfort and experience above all else.

Now it's true that this hasn't always been the case for us, with our older fan translations (2023 and prior, and even maybe some from 2024) lacking in quality to our newer ones. We highly recommend buying and reading official translations in those aforementioned cases.

We're always trying to improve the reader experience, so feel free to give us some feedback in the comments or through our [Discord](#)!

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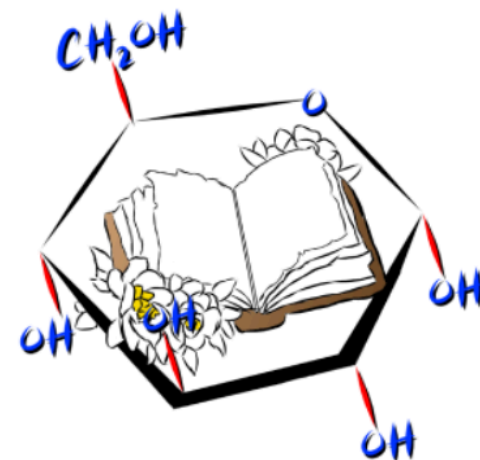
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Prologue - A United Front

“...Say what now?”

It was the night when the piano club’s proposal in the to-be-convened student assembly had been brought to the student council. Masachika had been relaxing in his room, only to have suddenly received a call from Yuki, her words leaving him utterly perplexed.

“Like I said,” Yuki reaffirmed, “It really sounds like there’s gonna be some sorta scheme aimed at Alya-san regarding that student assembly thing that came up today, the one between the piano and light music clubs. Just thought I’d let you know.”

Of course, Masachika understood what she was saying. But why did Yuki have such information in the first place, and why was she going out of her way to tell Masachika, who was, by all accounts, a rival candidate?

“Why... are you warning me here?”

“Because, to be honest... it looks like it’s gonna be something that might be more than I can handle by myself,” Yuki answered after a brief pause in response to his frank question.

It was an unusually timid admission that only deepened his perplexity.

“However,” she then raised her voice slightly as she continued, *“I’ve got one condition. As payment for the info, I want you, Onii-chan, to promise not to interfere with the informant.”*

“And what’s that s’posed to mean?”

“Well, to put it in a nutshell... Ayano’s the one who’s brought me this info, so we don’t want ol’ Onii-chan getting in the way of her spy work, do we now?”

“Ayano? You mean she’s...” Masachika trailed off, recalling how strangely Ayano had been acting lately as he heard Yuki’s explanation.

Ah, could this be what... that's been about...?

His childhood friend had looked to be carrying something heavy on her mind, after all. Faced with what seemed like the reason behind it, the option of not asking for the details had simply vanished for Masachika.

“...Alright,” he conceded. “So what’s with this info?”

A brief pause then hung in the air for a moment.

“Nonoa-san looks to be betraying Alya-san.”

“...Huh?”



“What... do you mean?”

It was now early the next morning, where in the student council room, Alisa, having heard the warning that Masachika had gotten from Yuki, donned a look of complete bewilderment. Her mind struggled to keep up, and Masachika didn’t seem to fare any better.

“No like, me too... Nonoa betraying *you*? I don’t get it,” he parroted her confusion. “In any case, what I’ve heard from Yuki is that she’s trying to use Ayano to isolate me and her from coming to the student assembly, and that she’s trying to maneuver things so that you and Ayano would be assigned to counting the votes. There’s apparently supposed to be... some sorta scheme that’ll threaten your position then...”

Even saying it out loud himself didn’t help it make much more sense. In fact, it was probably why Yuki had passed along such information in the first place: for his help in making sense of it all.

“Regarding all of this... How certain is it?” Alisa asked after seriously thinking it over for a moment.

“I can’t imagine Ayano lying here...” yet Masachika’s tone showed he clearly couldn’t give a firm answer. “Her going all the way to spy is surprising, but again... I guess it’s something she might do if it’s for Yuki. Or rather, it sounds like she’s decided she couldn’t get any more info out of Nonoa and turned to Yuki for her judgment; that’s entirely plausible too. Still, there ain’t really much proof that Yuki herself’s being completely honest ’bout the whole thing either...”

The tip had come from a rival candidate, after all, a tip where they were now forced to suspect their own ally, no less. Who to trust, what to believe, or how far to accept any of it? None of it was clear.

And yet...

“My gut’s telling me that... Yuki’s not lying here. That’s what I think,” Masachika concluded, prompting deep lines to form between Alisa’s brows.

It was only natural. Trusting Yuki meant doubting Nonoa. And for Alisa, the sheer emotional strain of suspecting one of her only friends had to be immense.

“...What if we just go straight to Nonoa-san and probe her about it directly?”

“Nope, can’t do that.”

“Why’s that?”

“I promised I wouldn’t interfere with Ayano’s spying on Nonoa. Us messing up with the wrong move here could make her suspect that her scheme’s been leaked.”

“...In other words, you’re saying we have to pretend we don’t know anything, right?”

“That’s how it looks, hm~?”

Even so, facing the student assembly while pretending to know nothing without any prep was utter foolishness. What kind of scheme awaited them? Or rather, was there even a scheme to begin with at all? There was just so much the two didn’t know, but assuming a conspiracy was in play here, they *had* to come up with some sort of countermeasure.

Yet... with only the knowledge that Alisa was the target, what kind of action could they even take...?

Should I just have Alya skip the student assembly too...?
Masachika let that thought float throughout his mind. *No, taking our eyes off the whole thing's dangerous in its own way, huh? And to start with, dodging the matter here only means kicking the problem down the road. Smarter to deal with it now than get blindsided later...*

Thinking through it this far, one person connected to this debacle suddenly came to mind.

"Come to think of it..." Masachika uttered.

"What?"

"Ah, no," yet he quickly shook his head the moment Alisa clung to the words he had let slip from his mouth.

"Tell me. We need any scrap of information we can get right now, no matter how trivial it is."

"Ngh, hmm..." Masachika hesitated in the face of his partner's earnest gaze, before reluctantly speaking. "Truth is... Kiryuuin had also said that Nonoa was plotting something for the student assembly..."

"Kiryuuin...? Like, baldi—Sumire-senpai's cousin?"

"Yeah, *that* Kiryuuin. Yuusho Kiryuuin."

Picturing the pretentious schoolmate who'd been doing nothing but pestering him lately, Masachika's mouth twisted in displeasure.

"Right. Then, let's ask *that* Kiryuuin-san about it too," Alisa said with a swift decision.

"Huuuuuh...? Seriously?"

"Why not?"

"No, for starters, it's like the guy naturally has it out for Nonoa; no way we're getting anything objective from him here..." Masachika grimaced as if the thought itself offended him, all while Alisa tilted her head slightly with a complicated look.

“I don’t really know him well, but... him aiming to be student council president back in junior high means he’s capable at the very least, right?” she asked.

“Ahhh. Well... he’s a li’l overconfident and doesn’t really care ’bout the means to get what he wants.”

“And if I remember, he had a debate against Sayaka-san and Nonoa-san and lost, if I’m not mistaken?”

“Yep, right.”

“That means, in other words... he knows Nonoa-san as an opponent more than anyone else, doesn’t he?” Alisa reasoned, eliciting a gasp from Masachika. “That sort of instinct—call it intuition, or rather his judgement—might actually be worth trusting, don’t you think?”

“.....”

Such a thought had never crossed Masachika’s mind, and all he could do was freeze, eyes wide at Alisa’s unexpected remark.

That’s true... It’s precisely ’cause he’s a villain who’s used to tossin’ malice at others that maybe he’s all the more sensitive to malice directed at himself, he rationalized. Could that... actually be it? But, man...

Nevertheless, Masachika still couldn’t help but feel a strong reflexive sense of aversion to relying on Yuusho. He couldn’t deny the feeling of not wanting to expose someone as dignified as Alisa to someone like that.

And in the first place, getting involved with him now’s nothing but a risk if we’re thinking ’bout the election here... His awful reputation’s definitely dragging down our support if he ends up cooperating with our camp. Hmmmm~

Seeing Masachika stuck in indecision after turning over every possible angle, Alisa could only shrug.

“Alright. *I’ll* go talk to him first alone.”

“Huh?”

“The two of you seem to have this heavy history, and you being there means he might not be able to stay calm either.”

“No, that’s...” Masachika instinctively tried to refute her words, only to trail off in the end.

But still, letting Alisa and Yuusho meet one-on-one was the last thing Masachika could accept.

Then again, setting aside all that emotion, thinking about it rationally made Alisa objectively correct: they *should* hear Yuusho out.

In that case, Masachika’s own conclusion was already set...

“Nnghhh~,” he squirmed. “Fine! But I’m coming too.”

“Eh? But like I said, you being there means he’ll—”

“I’ll leave the talking to you. I’ll just listen in from the back.”

“What, are you *that* worried about leaving it to me?” Alisa sulked with a displeased tone, prompting Masachika to shake his head.

“No, it’s not that I’m not confident with leaving it to you... I’m worried because I don’t know what *he* might do.”

“He’s not going to do anything, is he...?”

“No, no... No way he won’t,” Masachika immediately denied with a tone as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “This is the guy who caused that whole mess at the cultural festival, y’know? It’s better to stay on your guard, ain’t it?”

“.....”

“I see what you’re trying to say, but...” yet Alisa could only tilt her head, unconvinced.

“What?”

“Considering what happened at the cultural festival... Kiryuuin-san is the type who works from behind the scenes without dirtying his own hands, am I right? If we think about it that way, the chances of him doing something to me directly are pretty low, aren’t they...? There’s no reason for him to.”

“.....”

Hearing Alisa’s calm and logical point, Masachika finally realized that the “rational judgment” he thought he was making was, in fact, driven purely by emotion.

Ah, I see... I was...

To put it simply, unable to stand the thought of leaving Alisa alone with Yuusho. The both of them alone in some room: just imagining that caused a thick fog of unease to spread deep within his chest.

No, that’s just... ’cause I’m worried about her. And because I just hate the damn guy. Ugh, but I guess that means I’m not one to talk, huh...?

Realizing that he was guilty of the same kind of thing he had just accused Yuusho of, namely how “the guy naturally has it out for Nonoa so there was no way they’d get an objective opinion,” Masachika reflected on himself with a heavy sigh.

Nevertheless, that didn’t change the fact that things that were hard to accept were simply hard to accept...

“...Oh well, just in case—”

“You’re overprotective, hm?” Alisa cut him off with a sigh mixed with exasperation and resignation at Masachika’s terse insistence on accompanying her, before putting on a faint sulkish expression as she then lightly pursed her lips while toying with a strand of her hair.

Seeing that, all Masachika could do was hesitate for a few seconds before averting his eyes.

“...I *am* worried, y’know?” he started off with that murmur. “Not about whether you can handle it... but about *you*.”

In face of the small fragment of his true feelings that Masachika let slip, Alisa’s eyes shot out wide. The fingers that played with her hair paused, and she stared at him as he looked away, his lips twitching awkwardly.

Quickly then casting her gaze downward...

“You *are* overprotective, aren’t you?” she repeated the same words, but with a different nuance this time as she started to fiddle with her hair again, her eyes darting all over the place.

【Not that I hate it though,】 she then added in a tiny whisper.

Ugh.

It had been a while since Alisa’s blunt murmurs of affection hit him square in the chest like that, and all Masachika could feel was his breath caught in that moment.

Still, pretending not to notice as she glanced at him over and over shyly, he forced a calm front.

“Then, that settles it. I’ll send Kiryuuin a message since thanks to the fact I’ve still got his contact from our time in the junior high student council; I’ll handle calling him over. As for the time and place...”

“...How about the student council room during lunch?”

“Mm... Sounds good. Let’s go with that, shall we?”



“Hey, sorry ’bout that,” came an almost insincere voice. “Had a teacher stop me for a moment.”

““ ””

It was now lunch break, and Yuusho had arrived at the student council room about five minutes later than the agreed time. Masachika greeted him with a glare, all the while Alisa shot him a look of 80% bewilderedness and 20% judgement.

Though he did technically offer an apology along with an excuse, his expression showed no remorse at all, completely at odds with his words.

Maybe he showed up late out of spite for calling him here so suddenly?

“Your baldness is spreading again, ain’t it?” Masachika lobbed that question straight at him, as if to substitute his criticism of how tardy he was.

“...It’s all Sumire-neesan’s choice, okay?” Yuusho explained after making a face akin to swallowing something unpleasant. “I have to keep my head shaved for at least the rest of the year.”

“Ahhh, so you’re getting it shaved regularly, huh? No wonder the patchy spots of hair keep shifting about a bit. Ain’t got a clue to how you’re shavin’ it here,” Masachika shrugged, earning a shot of unspoken protest from Yuusho before the latter composed himself.

“So then? What do you want?” Yuusho snapped in a slightly curt tone, throwing the two a suave side-glance that dripped with pretension.

“I’m just the messenger here,” Masachika responded by flicking his gaze toward Alisa with a dismissive gesture. “The one who wants to talk’s my partner here.”

Having said that, Masachika folded his arms as he leaned his back against the wall, making it clear that he intended to simply watch. As Yuusho responded with a slight shrug, Alisa stepped forward.

“Nice to meet you... I suppose that’s appropriate since it’s our first proper meeting, Kiryuuin-san?”

“Ahhh, that’s right,” Yuusho lifted his chin with an insufferably arrogant gesture. “Is calling you Kujou-san alright here?”

“Yes, ” Alisa responded while maintaining her serious expression. “I’d like you to be frank with me: what do you mean when you say that Miyamae-san is plotting something for the upcoming student assembly concerning the piano and light music clubs?”

Faced with her question, Yuusho tilted his head lightly before casting a quick glance toward Masachika.

“You hear that from Kuze?” he then spoke in a needlessly self-important tone. “Oh well, he’s the one who refused to listen to me at all, though~”

A blatant jab, one Masachika couldn’t help but twist his mouth over, with Alisa also frowning in tow.

“Isn’t it only natural that he wouldn’t want to listen if *that’s* the tone you take?” she pointed out clearly.

Her exceedingly straightforward remark made Yuusho’s eyes widen in surprise, and he instinctively ran his right hand through his hair as if dispirited... only to realize that there wasn’t any to grab at in the first place, letting his shoulders droop a little sadly.

“That’s true, I was clearly a bit rude. I apologize,” he then bowed his head honestly.

This time, it was Masachika who widened his eyes in surprise.

With Yuusho not saying anything more on that point, he passively dropped his theatrical demeanor and looked straight at Alisa.

“So, this is about Miyamae, was it? It’s simple enough. The whole matter clearly screams that someone’s malice is at work.”

“...Specifically?” Alisa probed, prompting Yuusho to snap his index finger upright as he continued.

“First, the fact our vice president’s trying to recklessly convene a student assembly. Given her personality, she’d normally try to persuade the light music club before ever resorting to something like *this*. Unless, of course, someone talked her into it, hm?”

“I see... and the next?”

Prompted, Yuusho then raised his middle finger alongside his index.

“Negative chatter about the piano club has been heating up again out of nowhere. For gossip that had been finally calming down to flare up again now? I can only guess that someone’s obviously stirring the pot.”

Having said that, he then lightly spread his arms and shrugged.

“Then, you’ve got the whole origin of this matter lying with none other than the light music club: the club Miyamae belongs to... And, well, the rest’s just my intuition.”

“Your intuition...” Alisa softly repeated his words, frowning for a while in thought. “...In other words, you mean you’re convinced this student assembly is all Nonoa-san’s doing, based on your own experience of being up against her back in junior high, right?”

“Well, that’s about it?” Yuusho confirmed. “Judging from how you’re acting, it looks like you’ve happened to get some solid information from someone other than me, huh now?”

“...Something like that.”

Though slipping past Yuusho’s own probing with ease, Alisa still wore a difficult expression as she deliberated.

“If you’re sitting there and wondering, ‘why would Miyamae do such a thing~?’, it’s pointless,” Yuusho shrugged and said. “That woman acts when she decides to act. Trying to analyze her reasoning using ordinary standards or common sense is utterly meaningless.”

His words pushed Alisa’s eyes to waver as she looked toward Masachika. Her look held a desperate desire for denial, and yet... all Masachika did was merely lower his own gaze slightly, offering Yuusho a form of reluctant agreement.

“!”

Precisely reading Masachika’s intent, Alisa clenched her teeth sharply and lowered her face.

“Alya...” Masachika muttered.

He stepped away from the wall to stand beside his partner as he saw her struggling. But just as he hesitantly reached out to place a hand on her shoulder, Alisa suddenly snapped her head up and looked straight at Yuusho.

“So then. Assuming Nonoa-san is plotting something, what exactly do you intend to do about it?”

“Stop her, obviously. The piano club’s survival is at stake here. And besides, the idea of letting that woman have her way puts a bad taste in my mouth.”

“How do you intend to specifically? You don’t actually know what Nonoa-san is planning either, do you?”

“I unfortunately have no obligation to be that frank with you, do I?” Yuusho turned his face away, refusing to answer this time.

“Then let’s make a deal, shall we?” Alisa offered, smoothly shifting from a position of questioning to that of negotiation as if she expected his response. “If you tell us your plan, I’ll share the info *we’ve* gathered. And if you’re intending to do something during the student assembly, then I’ll offer certain arrangements as a member of the hosting student council.”

Faced with her fluid words, Yuusho could only look over at her in mild surprise, staring directly at her face before letting out a wry smile.

“In other words, me refusing here means you might bar me from attending the student assembly altogether, is that it now?”

“Eh? No, that’s not—”

“*Heh...* You’d better learn to wield those sort of threats if you intend to become student council president someday~,” he then swapped the nature of his smile as he saw Alisa immediately let her gaze wander in distress, sweeping Masachika—who had quietly dropped his outreached hand—into view. “Sure. Regarding this student assembly, let’s form a united front, shall we?”



“So, if push comes to shove, you’re saying you’ll provoke your former piano club members to bring the entire student assembly to a halt, right, Kiryuuin-san?”

“Sure, but that’s only possible if they’re moved in the first place, riiight~? And that... all depends on our vice prez, doesn’t it?”

“We should probably inform Prez and our vice president quietly then,” Alisa suggested. “Especially Sarashina-senpai. She’ll likely physically block a disruption onstage if we don’t lay the groundwork beforehand.”

“*Ahaha*, that’s easy to imagine alright...” Masachika uttered.

It was currently the afternoon after school. Following Yuusho’s insistence that they could never be sure which students on campus might be under Nonoa’s influence, the five of them—Masachika, Alisa, Yuki, Ayano, and Yuusho—had gathered at a karaoke parlor two stations away from school, sharing the information each of them had as they held a strategy meeting.

Given there were only a few days left before the student assembly would convene, they’d gathered in a rush. Still, with these five sitting face-to-face, the discussion moved quickly.

“I want to identify whatever tricks may be set in motion as much as possible... So could you wait until the last possible moment to intervene?” Alisa asked.

“Well, I want to expose Miyamae’s shenanigans as much as you do, so that’s what I’ll do,” Yuusho agreed. “But depending on how things go, I may move without waiting for a signal.”

“That’s fine with us.”

“Then I’ll head home on the day of,” Yuki concluded. “Masachika-kun will go to the wind ensemble clubroom, and we’ll all meet again afterward.”

“Yeah... Got it.”

With the meeting itself being wrapped up after just over thirty minutes, Masachika and the rest all let out small sighs as they sipped at their juices, all the while Yuusho suddenly queued up a song.

“...No, what’re you tryna sing for here?”

“Coming all the way here to karaoke and not singing at least one song’s pretty lame, isn’t it~?” he reasoned as he ignored Masachika’s lazy stare, adjusting the volume before standing up and beginning to sing in English. “Wow.....So jeallyyyy.”

A Western song too... Damn, he's insanely good at it as well.

Letting out a small, exasperated sigh in the face of an utter narcissist enjoying himself alone, Masachika confirmed that Yuusho's attention was fully fixed on the karaoke screen before turning to Ayano.

"So... you doing okay, Ayano?" he asked, with the girl who had, as always, erased her presence and blended into the air, jumping lightly at his question before tilting her head.

"...I am not experiencing any particular physical discomfort," she stated, keeping her ever so formal tone.

"No, that's not what I meant... Like, doing something you're not used to, like spying? I was just wondering if you were holding up mentally here," Masachika explained, yet he regretted asking something so foolish the moment he did.

There was no way she was okay. No matter how distant this childhood friend of his was from Nonoa, the very act of tricking someone and getting information out of them like that was something even she would feel hurt over.

And yet...

"There is no problem," Ayano spoke. "I was merely driven by a sense of duty for a task that only I could accomplish."

"....."

Her emotionless tone gave no insight to any of her true feelings. Glancing at his sister and seeing her raise her shoulders with a "it can't be helped" gesture, Masachika chose not to press further.

Oh well, I'll make sure to properly thank her once this is all over, he instead conveyed to Yuki with his eyes.

Yeah, that's right, she silently replied with her own before picking up the remote. "Well then, since we're already here, why don't we sing a little too? But really... Kiryuuin-san's actually good at singing..."

"The way he sings with that whole full of himself act really gets under my skin, though."

“Eh? We’re singing now? Does that mean me too?” Alisa asked.

“Of course, it only really starts when our diva sings here.”

“Who’re you calling a diva... Geez.”

“I’m for some reason getting a li’l hungry here too; should we just get dinner here while we’re at it?”

“Ah~, sounds good. Let’s do that.”

And so, the five of them ended up enjoying a karaoke sesh for about an hour while having dinner before finally parting ways.



“Right then, I’ll take a taxi home.”

“Okay then, see you tomorrow.”

“Thank you all for today. Please be careful on your way home.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“See you tomorrow.”

After watching Yuusho head to the main street and Yuki and Ayano get into the Suou family car, Masachika turned to Alisa.

“Right then, we should head back too,” he suggested.

“Yes.”

But as the two began walking side by side toward the station, Alisa suddenly let a small smile slip, making him blink in surprise.

“Alya? What’s up?”

“Ah, *mm...*” she shook her head a little sheepishly, probably not even fully conscious that she had smiled, pausing for a moment before speaking. “Um, hearing that Nonoa-san was trying to set up a trap for me had made me really uneasy, but... being able to work with Yuki-san and Ayano-san about it makes me feel relieved, I guess.”

Her thoughts seemed to settle all the more as she talked, and Alisa continued with a gentle smile.

“As for me, I *do* want to become student council president, and I absolutely don’t want to lose to Yuki-san... But at the same time, I guess it’s also true that I never really want to fight if I could help it.”

“Hmm...”

Though it was only temporary, Alisa appeared to be happy that she was cooperating with someone she considered both a rival and a friend. It was something that Masachika felt like agreeing with as well, almost responding with a calm nod.

“Yeah, true,” he wanted to say, however...

“...Hate to rain on your parade here, but you really shouldn’t be letting your guard down too much, y’know?”

“Hm? Wh-why?” Alisa blinked repeatedly as she turned toward him, caught off guard by his unexpected warning.

Looking away from her gaze, Masachika could only face forward as he spoke slowly.

“It’s true: we’ve decided to work together to deal with whatever Nonoa seems to be plotting up, but... that doesn’t make us allies. No, we’re still rivals at the core even with this whole thing. Yuki understands that too.”

“What... do you mean?”

“I mean...”

And with that, time returns to the day of the student assembly.

“Not saying I’m their ally or anything. It’s just it looked like you were dragging the piano club through something shady, weren’t you now? So I’m merely just cooperating temporarily to crush that li’l scheme of yours.”

“I was the one who brought him in,” Alisa stepped forward as she said that.

Nonoa could only widen her eyes in brief surprise in response, before bursting out into laughter while looking as if she were enjoying herself from the bottom of her heart.

“*Ohoho~?*” That’s how it is, hmm~? Welp, guess Kuzecchi wouldn’t willingly try to team up with Yuusho anyway~,” she speculated while shooting a sidelong glance at Masachika, whose mouth twisted in its corner as she hit the mark dead on, before resuming her analysis with a matter-of-fact tone. “So basically, knowing that someone was settin’ things up, Alissa here still went ahead and attended the student assembly all on her own, without a care in the world, ’cause she had Yuushou’s table-flip as insurance. You prepared a way to forcibly shut down the whole thing in advance, and purposefully dove headfirst into the trap to figure out who was plotting what.”

Laying out her deductions one after another as if they were mere idle musings, Nonoa then shifted her gaze to Alisa, who in turn wore a stern expression.

“Then, when Vice-Prez-san started screaming all about fraud, you more or less grasped the whole setup... and deliberately called for a revote to pinpoint the culprit. That’s bold, riiight~?” she stated with a cheerful smile playing at her lips, clapping her hands as if to praise Alisa’s valiant effort.

Clap clap, clap, clap, clap.

The sound of her applause echoed, somehow chilling in the silent classroom.

An empty applause that no one else joined in on... As it came to its end, Nonoa kept her hands clasped together with a soft thud, letting her smile drop away in an instant before raising one eyebrow and lightly spreading both her arms.

“So,” she called out. “What’s this?”

This being the current situation: pressed by the five of them with Alisa at the forefront.

“I’ve got absolutely no idea what’s the cause of all this. I don’t understand why you’re all here doing this to me.”

That was the attitude she projected, an attitude so brazen that it seemed nothing but insolent to Masachika and the others. Even Alisa and Yuki couldn’t help but furrow their brows in response.



“Nonoa-san, you appeared to have known that something would happen even before it was decided that a student assembly was to be convened, and you hinted as much to Ayano,” the latter stated, being the first to speak as she maintained her refined ladylike smile. “Why was that?”

“Well look, I’ve got loads of acquaintances, right? Kiiinda heard some rumors from them, like there was some shaaaady stuff goin’ on to target Alissa~. I was actually originally planning to warn Kuzecchi and her ’bout it, y’know~? ...But, you see, I’d already said I’d side with Ayanono, didn’t Iiii~? Welp... was never expecting her to pass all that info to you and Alissa, though.”

Nonoa had simply pretended to play out the role of a well-meaning informant. It was a smooth explanation lacking any hesitation, spun with such a carefree smile, and sounded so natural that anyone who didn’t know her true nature would instinctively have the thought, “Oh, I-I see how it is,” spring into mind as they easily found themselves accepting it outright.

However...

““““““ ””””””””

There was, of course, not a single person present who truly bought that story. None at all, and yet... there also wasn’t any concrete proof to decisively brand it as a lie either.

Following the body and baggage inspection of those who’d attended the student assembly earlier, eight perpetrators involved in manipulating the voting results had already been apprehended. Yet, during such an inspection, Nonoa had been cleared. No testimony linking her to any crime could be obtained from those caught as well. The only thing the eight of them—alongside Aoi, the piano club’s vice president—had said unanimously was that they had been egged on by an unfamiliar female student. A student whose physique and appearance didn’t match Nonoa’s at all... What was more, Ayano herself had not been able to obtain any incriminating statement of admission from Nonoa up until this point either. Despite never realizing that she was only pretending to be compliant while plotting otherwise, Nonoa had maneuvered with such care to ensure that she would never be allowed to be pinned down by her own words.

“I mean, it sounded like Ayanono wanted Kuzecchi and you to get along, right, Yukki?” Nonoa nonchalantly explained. “So, just to make sure that neither of you would’ve gotten caught up in any plot targeting Alissa by any chance, I went out of my way to make sure that the two of you didn’t participate in the student assembly.”

“Then what was with pulling the strings to get Ayano and Alya-san to handle the votes?” Yuki pressed further.

“There’s nothing really deep ’bout it, though? If Alissa was being targeted, then Ayanono—who knew that much—might as well stay with her. Being close together means she’d notice right away if something actually happened, right? So, in the event that Alissa actually ends up in a pinch, wouldn’t the question of whether to help her or not be up to Ayanono? Something like that?”

“In that case, wasn’t there no need to designate them as vote counters?”

“Welp, maybe you’re right... But counting the votes means you’d always be up on the stage, and therefore be able to see the whole venue, right?” Nonoa reasoned. “On the flip side, given it makes you so clearly visible from where the audience is sitting, it’d be harder for the culprits to make their move. It was simply a placement I thought worked the best both offensively and defensively. I *did* at least try to be considerate in my own way, y’know~?”

“.....”

Smoothly delivered excuses with a slack, easy smile still on her face. It was a moment where Yuki could only maintain her refined smile, with lips sealed shut, in response to. She had probably judged that continuing to press the issue head-on like this would be like pushing water uphill. Masachika, too, thought that Nonoa’s excuses, though impressively bold, were flawless. So flawless, in fact, that they looped back to bordering on suspicion.

Then, maybe because she had sensed that Yuki’s offensive had now stalled, Nonoa let her expression drain away as she turned her gaze toward Ayano.

“By the way, when did you start leaking all *this*, Ayanono?” she questioned, leaning her upper body sharply to her left. “I was helping you out because you said you wanted Kuzecchi and Yukki to get along, you know~? Was that all a lie then?”

“...I had already received warnings from Yuki-sama and Masachika-sama to be cautious around you, Nonoa-san,” Ayano opened her mouth to explain after slowly blinking in response.

She spoke with a calm and careful tone, as if she were organizing her own thoughts.

“That you are exceptional when it comes to manipulating others, a genius when it comes to controlling hearts... And that you have been able to carry out numerous covert schemes until now with such talent. That is precisely why... that day, on the stairs, when you closed your distance with me...” she continued, recalling back to the time on that emergency staircase when Nonoa had pressed her with such eloquent words, urging her into self-disclosure despite them being almost complete strangers back then, “...I became wary. I had suspected that you might have some sort of plot at play when you had approached me for that reason... It was precisely why I decided to deliberately show an opening myself to observe your reaction, Nonoa-san.”

Nonoa could only narrow her eyes slightly at her words. Deliberately revealing a weakness to slip into another person’s inner circle? That was exactly the method Nonoa herself had used on Masachika prior to approaching Ayano.

So I ended up being caught by the very method I used myself, huh...? she lamented. *That was pretty careless of me, wasn’t it~?*

It was a realization that induced a strange amusement inside of her, one that made her want to applaud even as she let a wry smile creep across her face. Even so, she shook her head side to side with an aggrieved look.

“That hurts, y’know...? To think that both Kuzecchi and Yukki would look at me like that. And you too, Ayanono. All I did was listen to you sincerely while giving advice,” Nonoa spoke as if she were the victim, spitting out words that grated on the nerves.

“Do you really think such an excuse will pass?” Yuki asked.

“I don’t, y’know? But if it’s the truth, there’s nothing that could be done, could it?”

Even to her question, one that carried a subtle heightened pressure, Nonoa simply replied with a calm, feigned air of innocence.

At this, Alisa finally opened her mouth with a frustrated huff, unable to hold back any longer as she—

“!”

Yet even faster than that, Masachika stepped forward to grab her hand, stopping her from speaking. Seeing his partner turn to him in surprise, Masachika signaled with his eyes and a quick flick at her palm that he would handle this himself.

Adding to this, he directed his gaze toward Ayano’s skirt pocket, causing Alisa to fall silent with an albeit startled expression.

Good, good... Looks like she’s calmed down.

Relieved that he’d managed to stop Alisa from saying something rash, Masachika let out a quiet sigh of relief.

Facing Nonoa here was unexpected even for Masachika. Because of that, he hadn’t had the privilege of discussing with Alisa beforehand to coordinate how they should handle the present debacle... Still, that didn’t change the fact that they had already strategized how to handle such general situations like this before.

As I thought, making sure we’re aligned in our course of action ahead of time really does matter. Right, everything’s gone according to plan up to this point. From here on, it’s all about whether I can steer this convo to the exact point we’re heading for. That’s where it counts.

It was for that reason that he had to be careful with every single word from here on.

The whole reason we've been able to crush Nonoa's scheme and corner her this far has been entirely because of Alya. She's got Kiryuuin on our side and caught the other perpetrators, and we've gotten this far thanks to that... But it's all 'bout the battle of the words from here on out, and Alya's got practically no experience with this kinda verbal deception. Taking on Nonoa and whoever's out there like that would be too much for her.

So from here on, Masachika wanted her to leave it to him, pouring all that intent into his gaze as he stared straight into her eyes. With that, Alisa lowered her gaze slightly before nodding and stepping half a pace back.

"Do your best," came his partner's words, brimming with nothing but trust, flowing into him through the contact of their hands.

Drawing courage from that, Masachika switched his mindset into battle mode once more.

Alright... This is where it all counts, me, he addressed himself, steeling his resolve as he fixed his gaze on Nonoa, something she seemed to sense as she turned her eyes toward him as well, her lips curving into an amused grin.

"So, what about it, Kuzecchi?" A question tinged with provocation then came from those lips. "Will you believe me?"

"....."

Meeting Nonoa's probing stare with a stern one of his own, Masachika scratched at the back of his neck with his left hand.

"Yeah, I believe you," he answered. "Oh well, can't be helped if that's how it is."

His words prompted Ayano to widen her eyes as she looked toward him. Meanwhile, Nonoa's smile deepened in satisfaction.

Her question was simply her just extending a hand toward Masachika, after all. A hand that he had firmly taken.

Welp, of course you had no choice but to do that, did you now, Kuzecchi~? Nonoa thought, full of certainty after hearing Masachika's reply.

She was now sure that this conversation was, at this very moment, being recorded, most likely by Ayano. And that Masachika had no intention of cutting Nonoa loose.

Why of course, right~? Because if you won't stand a chance in the election if you cut me off, would you~?

Yes, Nonoa understood. She understood that in this situation, right here and now, Masachika and Alisa had no choice but to protect her.

Her popularity was extraordinarily high within this school, after all. If her betrayal were to come to light, Masachika and Alisa would completely lose the supporters who stood behind her. On top of that, they had boldly declared to the entire student body that they would be working together as fellow student council officers if they were to be elected back during the closing ceremony of the first semester. An internal strife erupting less than half a year later would inevitably mean that people would say that they lacked the ability to bring others together.

Even if, hypothetically, all the evidence of my betrayal were to come out, proving that I was entirely at fault beyond doubt, we'd still get a "Looks like they're fighting themselves anyway, so let's just play it safe and vote for Suou-san" type of situation. If it'll end up being that way, then Kuzecchi's best bet is to cover up the very fact of betrayal itself.

In short, in this place and moment, Masachika and Alisa could not be Nonoa's enemies. Yet, the instant she became certain of that, Nonoa felt her excitement rapidly drain away.

Ahhh... That's boring, right?

It was essentially all just a dead rubber from here on out. All that would unfold would just be Yuki and Yuusho's persistence in trying to squeeze some sort of definite statement out of her, while Masachika would keep them in check. It basically just required Nonoa to be careful to not slip up, a casual situation where she could just dodge and weave obstacles nonchalantly. Having read that far ahead, her interest waned, and she turned her eyes to the wall clock in the classroom.

Yet, however...

“But to begin with, you’re fundamentally lazy: you’ve got no reason to go through all that trouble to backstab us,” Masachika conjectured. “The only scenario that I can think of is that Sayaka’s still actually aiming to be president and told you to set us up.”

At his words, Nonoa froze for an instant before turning her gaze back.

There, she saw Masachika’s mouth curved into a loose, casual smile. “Oh well, it probably ain’t like that, though...” it seemed to say, yet his eyes fostered a keen, icy light. It was something that Nonoa understood with complete clarity: a clear threat.

Haaah~, so that’s how you’re comin’ at me.

In other words, Nonoa committing any further acts of betrayal aimed at causing harm to the Masachika-Alisa pair would only result in Sayaka being made to shoulder the responsibility. That was essentially what Masachika was saying. It was, without any question, a threat with the full understanding of Nonoa’s weak spot.

So you’re still laying down the law while protecting me, huh?
Nonoa lamented. *Maybe it’s still too early to let my guard down, after all?*

Revising her assessment that Masachika was no longer an enemy, Nonoa shifted her thoughts back into gear.

But y’know...? That threat doesn’t really exist, Kuzecchi. The oh-so-good-natured Kuzecchi pinning the stigma of being a traitor on an innocent Sayacchi? You wouldn’t be able to do that, would you? she mused, giving a dispassionate analysis of the situation with a cool head.

And yet, as if he’d seen straight through her thoughts, Masachika turned toward Yuusho.

“Hey, Kiryuuin,” he called out. “You think so too, don’t ya?”

“...Yeah, you’re right. Miyamae denying it here would just surely mean she’s protecting Taniyama. After all, she did take the blame to shield her at that debate during the first semester as well, amirite?” Yuusho answered, giving a theatrically exaggerated shrug, making Nonoa narrow her eyes slightly.

Ah... Yeah, Yuushou’s definitely happy to slap that kinda stigma onto Sayacchi if it’s him we’re talking about. Even if Kuzecchi tries to stop him...

She understood now. This really did work... as a threat.

No way... To think that Yuushou would end up playing the joker here...

He was already a loser whose status within the school had fallen as far as it could, shunned by every member of the current student council. Nonoa had been keeping an eye on his movements, given that he’s the head of the very piano club that had formed the basis for her whole scheme to start with, but in all honesty, she hadn’t been particularly wary of him at all.

And yet, to think your plans have been crushed by ol’ loser-chan over here, going all the way to set your fate in stone, hm...? Yuusho conveyed as much with a provocative jerk of his chin, as if he’d read her thoughts.

It was the type of gesture that should have been irritating beyond measure, and yet... it felt amusing to Nonoa. It was as though the excitement that had once cooled was flaring back up with a sudden whoosh.

Ahhhh... How nice, she thought. That’s right, guess I should play along here?

Letting that inner amusement rise to her cheeks, Nonoa flashed a grin so bright that it almost seemed fake.

“Of coooourse, isn’t there just noooo way I’d betray Kuzecchi and Alissa?” she mused. “I mean, suuure~, I might’ve if Sayacchi had told me to, but... she would never ask for such a thing, would she?”

“Welp, that’s true. I naturally believe that too,” Masachika answered, returning an equally dubious-looking cheerful smile as he continued to scratch the back of his neck with his left hand.

Fully aware that neither was saying what they truly meant, the two exchanged friendly grins all the same.

“But it’s truue~. It’s true I sided with Ayanono instead of giving you two the warnings I should have; I swear I’ll make up for it sometime soon, okaaaay~?”

“That so? That’d be a great help. Just make sure to report back to us and communicate properly when the time comes, alright?”

The two continued to maintain their outwardly amicable demeanors as they kept up with the quiet sparring beneath the surface... At least, until Yuki suddenly jumped in between them.

“Nonoa-san,” she called out. “Hand over who incited both the piano club’s vice president and the actual perpetrators, and we promise we won’t go after you any further. What do you say?”

Her proposal, casually tossed out, caught Nonoa completely off guard. A question posed in the form of an offer, one where showing even an ounce of hesitation would mean defeat.

“Hmm~? Sorry, but I don’t really get what you’re talkin’ about here, Yukki,” yet she replied without even the slightest of pauses.

“.....”

Once again unable to extract a straight answer, Yuki lightly narrowed her gaze as she gave off a subtle air of frustration, as if she were clicking her tongue inwardly.

And then, at that moment...

“H-how...?”

A voice perked up, unexpected not only for Yuki and Nonoa... but for Masachika as well.

“?”

“H-how!? How! How can you be so calm about this!?” cried a thin, squeezed out voice, belonging to none other than Ayano as she stood diagonally behind Yuki.

“I-it’s fine if it’s *m-me*. But Alisa and... Masachika-sama... th-they are, to you, Nonoa-san, f-friends, are they not!?” Ayano continued to shout with trembling lips, clenching her skirt tightly as the astonished gazes of everyone present turned toward her. “A-and yet you... b-betrayed th-those two, you... you—!”

Her words seemed to spill from the deepest settings of her heart before her head could even catch up. Her throat, her chest, her fists, her entire body shook violently as she desperately forced out her words with a tongue that wouldn’t cooperate. It was a raw display of passion from Ayano that even Masachika and Yuki rarely ever saw. She looked as though she might hyperventilate at any moment...

So as Yuki turned back, she pulled her into a tight embrace.

“Thank you, Ayano. It’s okay now. It’s really all okay now.”

“Y-Yuki... sama...”

As she gently stroked Ayano’s head, the tension gradually drained from her stiff body, and her breathing started to settle little by little. In front of her, Masachika and Alisa stepped forward, positioning themselves to block Nonoa from her view.

“Thanks, Ayano.”

“Thank you, Ayano-san. For getting angry on our behalf.”

With the former gently patting her head just as his sister had, and the latter giving a gentle, considerate smile, Ayano finally slowly took a deep breath as she lowered her gaze.

“...Masachika-kun, Alya-san,” Yuki said. “We will be heading home a little ahead of you two.”

“Yeah... Take care of Ayano.”

“Yes. Then, to you too, Kiryuuin-san,” she then addressed Yuusho, leaving only those words behind before exiting the classroom while holding Ayano close.

After watching their retreating figures, Masachika turned to Yuusho.

“You really saved us today, Kiryuuin. Thank you,” he expressed his attitude, bowing toward him.

“Oh...? Y-yeah...”

“But sorry, could you head home for now?” Masachika continued, unfazed by Yuusho, who had blinked repeatedly with a surprised expression on his face, clearly caught off guard. “I want to talk with Nonoa, just Alya and me.”

“Ah, *mm...*”

And with that, Yuusho also left the classroom, albeit looking unusually shaken as he nodded with an uncharacteristic obedience.

So, with only the three of them remaining, Masachika and Alisa faced Nonoa once again.

“So then, why did you end up backstabbing us?” the former asked her bluntly, discarding his manufactured, plastered-on smile.

“What’s gotten into you all a sudden, Kuzecchi?” Yet Nonoa merely deflected his question with the mere tilt of her head, her bright smile unchanged. “You said you’d believe me.”

“...Is that right? So you *really* have no intention of admitting it, hm?” Masachika spoke, inwardly clicking his tongue when faced with Nonoa as she continued her transparent act, unwilling to let her guard down or show a single opening.

Tsk. So you ain’t gonna slip up that easily, huh...? Masachika mused, scratching his head roughly with his right hand and dropping his gaze downward before continuing.

“Hey, Nonoa. Who was the female student that tried to set Alya up?”

“Geeez~, I told you. I don’t get what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, you don’t get what I’m talking about? You’re really serious?”

“Mm, not a clue~” Nonoa answered in an offhand tone, spreading both hands lightly as she did... only for Masachika to let out a small chuckle.

“Yeah, figures,” he commented. “Yuki did ask you something similar earlier, yet you kept feigning your ignorance of it, after all.”

“Right, right~,” Nonoa agreed, recalling how Yuki had pressed her. “I really wish you’d cut it out alrea—”

“There we go, knew you’d slip up eventually.”

Nonoa’s smile vanished in an instant.

“You don’t get what I’m talking about?” Masachika continued, staring straight at Nonoa, who had, in turn, gone utterly blank-faced in an instant. “What a strange thing to say. Y’know, wouldn’t you think that the first person that should’ve come to mind with the description, ‘the female student that tried to set Alya up,’ be the girl who’d confronted her from the audience back during the student assembly?”

In other words, one of the perpetrators who had manipulated the colors of the balls they had used to cast their vote. The very girl who was the first to denounce Alisa. Perhaps recalling her existence, Nonoa’s eyes widened just slightly.

“If you truly knew nothing, then you would’ve answered my question with something like, say, I don’t know, ‘She was Yuki’s classmate,’ or, ‘I don’t know who she is.’ And yet, when you heard my words, ‘the female student that tried to set Alya up,’ who you instantly thought of was the female student who incited those eight perpetrators and the piano club’s vice president. Someone that you, who definitely really knows nothing here, shouldn’t even know about. That’s what you told me, right? That you, quote-unquote, don’t get what I’m talking about, hm?”

Saying that much, Masachika then showed Nonoa the still-recording voice recorder he’d pulled out from his pocket, causing her eyes to shoot open even wider...

“Well, you see,” she spoke, letting out a soft chuckle. “Yuki *had* mentioned that there was such a person, didn’t she?”

“That’s absolutely true. But what she specifically asked was *who* incited them. She never once mentioned a female student.”

“You say that, but it’s still within the realm of worldplay, if anything... Isn’t that a li’l too weak as proof of betrayal?”

“It’d be real nice if that argument works on Sayaka too,” Masachika retorted wittily, causing the cracks to finally spread across Nonoa’s plastic smile as a hint of madness peeked through from within.

“...How interesting. You really are an interesting one, aren’t you, Kuzzechiii~? You’re about the only person who can corner me head-on like this.”

Her eyes gleamed brightly as she stared ahead, and she donned an expression that belonged to someone itching to lick their lips at any moment. It was a presence that would engraft an unconditional sense of danger to any ordinary person.

“What... are you?” Alya finally raised her voice as she faced such a sight. “What is it... that you want?”

It was a question that had slipped out almost involuntarily, prompting Nonoa to turn toward her this time, her eerie smile still firmly in place.

“Hmm~? What am I, huuuh...? To be honest, I don’t really understand myself all that well either^[2]... Ah, but maybe I’ve figured it out just a little today,” she murmured, before tearing her mouth into a wide grin as she threw both her arms open and looked up toward the ceiling.

“I want to witness the unexpected!”

Clenching both her hands tightly, as though she was grasping for something, Nonoa let out a sick laugh.

“Things that go beyond my expectations! Things that overturn them! All for me! That’s what I want to see!”^[3]

It was the first time Masachika had witnessed such a raw outpouring of pure desire from Nonoa. It was something so animalistic, a craving that was so unfiltered. Something that he could only frown at.

“So for that, you’d betray a friend or trick an innocent classmate. And you wouldn’t care, huh?”

“...Well, I never expected you to understand,” Nonoa responded, her head snapping back forward as her feverish madness cooled in an instant. “I don’t even understand why I feel this way myself.”

“I can’t say *I* can understand it too, but... I don’t think that’s a reason to deny it either,” a voice, which sounded as though it cast even herself aside, then responded to her remark.

It belonged to none other than Alisa.

“Just like how I always want to aim higher, you want to see the unexpected. That’s all there is to it, isn’t it?” she continued, looking straight at Nonoa all the while Masachika—and she as well—stared at her with eyes wide. “I’ve come to learn that all kinds of people live all kinds of lives ever since I enrolled in this school. And that there’s just no such superiority or inferiority among said ways of living either.”

Her words, backed by an undeniable sense of conviction, carried tremendous weight. A weight strong enough to naturally convince anyone listening that they were not spoken lightly. That they were not just mere words for show.

“Every way of living has its own merits and... there are just things that only someone living a specific life can see. So, regarding things I don’t understand, I’ve decided not to use their differences from myself as reasons to deny them. It’s what I’ve decided on. That’s why... I won’t deny you either. If that’s what gives you a reason to live then... I’ll accept it for what it is.”

A response that was neither affirmation nor rejection: acceptance. Something that Nonoa could only stare intently at Alisa over...

“How nice...” she murmured, breaking into a wide grin. “I think I might kinda like you, Alissa.”

“H-huh?”

“Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, that thought sounds gooood~. You were like that back at the student assembly earlier too, that was really great. I kinda wanna kiss you.”

“Uehh!? No, that’s...!” Alisa protested, instinctively taking a step back while Masachika shifted sideways to shield her.

Watching the both of them with clear amusement, Nonoa then spun around and turned her body toward the rear classroom door.

“Oh well, anyway... as long as you keep showing me things that exceed my expectations, I’ll proooperly cooperate with you two, ‘kaaaay~?” she teased. “I’ll start stirrin’ things up if I get bored, though.”

“And we’ll make sure to give a response worthy of it if it comes to that.”

“Do as you liiike~. Oh, and go ahead if you wanna let Sayacchi hear this whole convo. Feel free~”

And with those parting words, maintaining her cheerful attitude to the very end, Nonoa left the classroom.

“Well that was something...” Masachika uttered after letting out a long breath and making sure she was gone, turning to Alisa. “Nice work. You okay?”

“Yes, thanks for your hard work too... But, ‘you okay?’” Alisa asked, confused with his sudden question.

“No, um... Seeing her true self was like that was a first for you, right? I was just wondering if it shook you up.”

Faced with Masachika’s concern, Alisa fell into serious thought.

“...I was surprised, that’s true,” she slowly opened her mouth after a short while, carefully picking her words as she went. “But as I said earlier, I don’t intend on denying who Nonoa-san is. If anything, I think that her showing her true nature—or rather... the core of who she is?—was a good thing.

A response that was not one of bravado, nor indulgence toward a friend, but a conclusion she’d reached after proper consideration. Something that Masachika felt a genuine respect for Alisa over.

“It’s amazing... that you’re able to think that way,” he sang his praise.

“W-well, I suppose part of it is because it makes it feel like I wasn’t really betrayed.”

“Ahhh, gotcha.”

True enough, the plot against them itself had been thwarted partway through, and Nonoa hadn’t *directly* done anything to Alisa herself. Maybe that was precisely why Alisa could still view Nonoa somewhat objectively.

“Well, besides that...? It was nothing compared to who Yuki-san truly is,” she commented.

“...Yeah, right~?” Masachika replied, only being able to stare off into the distance.

Thinking of his little sister—someone who was even closer to Alisa than Nonoa ever was, and someone whose gap between her public façade and true self surpassed that of Nonoa’s—Masachika cleared his throat lightly before pulling himself together.

“Oh well, glad you weren’t too shaken... It’s getting late anyway; let’s head home for today.”

“Yes... Okay.”

Then, without either of them taking the lead, the two began to walk, leaving the school building and strolling side by side as they headed home along the dark night road.

“So, what are we going to do? About that recording from earlier?” Alisa asked.

“Hmm... Let’s put it on hold for now. There’s no telling how Nonoa’s gonna react if Sayaka actually finds out about her backstabbing us and tries to stop her. Worst case scenario, she might just throw caution to the wind and openly turn against us... Relying on Sayaka has gotta be a last resort. We’ll keep it as some sorta deterrent against Nonoa for now.”

“I see... I suppose it’s fine if you say so.”

“...Mm,” Masachika nodded slightly, exhaling as he released all the tension that he had been holding onto.

And then, all at once, a deep fatigue washed over him.

Yeah, I really was on edge during that convo, wasn't I...? No, sure, that's part of it, but this is...

What he was feeling wasn't just mental fatigue, but instead a murky, heavy feeling in his chest... Emotional fatigue.

Ah... That's it.

It was from the outburst of raw emotion Ayano had shown earlier. The lingering image of his usually expressionless childhood friend like that weighed heavy on Masachika's heart.

As for why she blew up back there... I'm partly to blame if you think 'bout it calmly, aren't I?

At the very least, it was something that could have been avoided had Masachika not taken Nonoa's side, instead joining Yuki in seriously condemning her. Ayano would have easily stayed as she always did if he'd done that, behind Masachika and Yuki as usual...

No, it was gonna happen sooner or later... huh? She'd been bottling it all up ever since she started spying on Nonoa, after all...

Even so, the fact remained that, despite Ayano putting such a burden on her heart to spy and warn Masachika and Alisa of danger, Masachika had still ended up repaying her kindness with what could only be described as an act of ingratitude.

We'd used her info to dodge Nonoa's scheme, and yet when it actually came time to confront her, I ended up taking "her side" to stop it... Masachika lamented. That must've definitely looked like nothing but outright betrayal from Ayano's perspective...

Still, Masachika had no regrets about how he had handled himself back then. With the upcoming election in mind, he believed he had handled the situation in the most optimal way possible, given the situation at hand as well. Still... it was also true that such relentlessly rational and calculating actions had caused Ayano to break down into such a fit.

Ugh... This makes me kinda... hate myself.

It couldn't be helped, after all. They were opposing candidates. It was something Masachika understood on the logical level. He really did. And yet... right now, even making such attempts to justify it all made him feel even more unbearably detestable.

"Thanks, okay? For thinking things through deeply," yet words of thanks came from beside him suddenly.

"Huh?"

They had caught him completely off guard, halting his thoughts. Turning to his side, he saw Alisa, still facing forward as she continued to speak slowly.

"If that was just me alone back there... I really might have just confronted Nonoa-san without thinking that far ahead, leaving nothing behind but distrust and friction before ending it all and breaking things off."

"Yeah... Oh well, that straightforwardness of yours is one of your good points though, Alya."

It was a straightforwardness that was always dazzling to Masachika... And yet, right now, that admiration hurtled a little.

"But even so, I'm sure that *that* alone would've just let Nonoa-san continue with all that nonchalant dodging, and she wouldn't have let us hear her true feelings," Alisa opined. "The reason she showed us what she was really thinking was because *you* drew it out of the course of that conversation... So, thank you," she then turned back to thank him, having walked a few steps ahead.

Masachika widened his eyes slightly in response. Meeting such a gaze head-on, Alisa could only widen hers as well.

"...What's wrong?" she asked.

"Huh...?"

"You somehow... look like you're in pain..."

"...Ah," Masachika murmured, tugging the corner of his mouth up in a wry smile in response to her question. "It's about Ayano... A li'l bit."

“Ah...”

“As I thought... she really isn’t cut out for elections like this. Wait, I guess I’m the whole dang reason why she’s involved in all this in the first place, though...”

And part of why she made that face this time too...

“Masachika-kun...”

“No, my bad. It was already too late for regrets the moment I became an opposing candidate to her. I thought I was prepared for something like this... or at least I *should’ve* been, but seeing something like that...? Ahhh yeah, it still gets to me.”

After saying that much, he shook his head from side to side, as if forcing himself to change gears.

“But... yeah. Being acknowledged by you, Alya... It makes me feel like maybe I wasn’t in the wrong after all. As for Ayano... I’ll make sure to properly apologize and make it up to her next time.

“.....”

“Don’t make that face now,” Masachika said with a small smirk. “We’ll win this election no matter what happens. That resolve hasn’t changed. Ain’t that right?”

“...Yes, that’s right.”

Seeing Alisa still looking troubled as she gave her nod, Masachika stepped alongside her and deliberately put on a brighter tone.

“Anyway, man, her acting was rock-solid... I’ve gotta hand it to her; her tongue just kept going.”

“Eh? Ah... Nonoa-san?”

“Yep. She was so flawless I almost wanted to laugh.”

“But even then, you went toe-to-toe with *that*, and... you won in the end, didn’t you?”

“Yeeeah~ ...Welp, it was a pretty narrow victory, though.”

“But even so, you outplayed her... I have to admit I honestly respect you.”

“Yeah... *Mm...* thanks.”

【And you were really cool, too...】

“*Ggh!*” Masachika nearly choked, feeling a hot gaze on his cheek right after Alisa’s murmured Russian whisper.

Or rather, a strange sound *had* slipped from the back of his throat.

“Anyway, I’m surprised,” he then quickly changed the subject, hastily trying to cover his reaction up. “I’d never thought you’d call for a revote just to expose the plot against you.”

“Eh...? Ohhh. We still couldn’t catch the mastermind behind it all because of that, though. Ayano-san’s spying was exposed to Nonoa-san too...”

“No, that actually worked out in our favor too. Had Ayano kept that up, there was a chance that Yuki could’ve gotten hold of more concrete proof of Nonoa’s betrayal.”

“Ah, I suppose you could look at it that way too.”

To begin with, Masachika and Co. had been waiting near the empty classroom after the student assembly because of a realization he had come to while listening with Yuki to Alisa and Yuusho’s account of what had happened. “Huh? Don’t Alya’s actions look unnatural from Nonoa’s point of view?” he had thought, and with that, they had gone along with Ayano when she was summoned by Nonoa. So, though it probably felt like Alisa had done something completely unnecessary and extra from her own point of view, from Masachika’s perspective, it was nothing short of a great move.

“Besides,” he continued, “Catching the perpetrators was huge. Though, yeah, it would’ve been ideal if we’d caught the female student who’d egged them on too...”

“Yeah... I wonder who she is?”

“No clue, but we’d really be neutralizing one of Nonoa’s important pawns if we can identify her. Same goes for Yuki and Ayano too. That girl would be a crucial witness for them: someone with a high chance of being able to connect the whole thing to Nonoa. Securing her’s the next decisive battle, I guess...”

“Understood,” Alisa gave a firm nod as she fixed her expression, setting her sights on the next objective.

Nodding back once, Masachika then turned his gaze toward the empty night sky.

That female student’s almost definitely cooperating with Nonoa while knowing her true nature... Just who is she?



Right around that very moment, the very female student in question, Miyabi Shikumagawa, faced Nonoa in a room of the school building that had long been completely deserted.

“So, the plan fizzled out and our eight perpetrators were caught in the end, hm...? How unfortunate,” she bemoaned, lowering her brows in genuine sympathy despite being the person who had taken part in orchestrating the whole thing. “So, now what? The plan failed, and yet here you are looking like you’re having fun. Why’s that, my majesty?” she then moved on to questioning Nonoa.

Unlike her usual listless expression, Nonoa currently wore an oddly cheerful look.

“Hmm~? I wonder whyyy~?” she spoke without even turning toward Miyabi. “Perhaps it’s ’cause I got to see Alissa and Ayanono’s unexpected sides; maybe that’s iiiit~?”

“Haaah...”

“Then there’s Kuzecchi and Yuushou who totally went with moves I tootally didn’t expect, riiiight~? I’ve never had my plans completely foiled like this before, so maybe I just ended up enjoyin’ it.”

“I see; don’t get that at all,” Miyabi could only say so with an exasperated yet somewhat lonely tone, only to continue with her questioning. “So then, what’re we gonna do from here?”

“Hmm~, I guess I’ll have to cozy up to Kuzecchi and Alissa for a whiiile~? I’ve gotta regain the trust I’ve lost from this whole thing, after all.”

“That so...?”

“Shouldn’t you maybe lie low for a bit too, Miyabi~? Yukki and Kuzecchi’s definitely gonna try and pin you down.”

“Yeah. Oh well... I was in disguise. I think I’ll be fine.”

“I think so too, y’knoooow~?” Nonoa agreed. “But, complacency’s the enemy of progress. Alright, good work! Dismissed!”

“Hold it,” Miyabi stopped her flat with a reproachful stare, just as she tried to leave after clapping her hands once together. “You haven’t paid me back, you know?”

“Ahhh~...”

“You promised me no NGs^[4]; you told me that, right?” Miyabi continued to demand her reward with a serious expression, prompting Nonoa to curl her lips into a sinister smile, one that seemed to mock her desperation as she reached toward the ribbon tie at her neck.

“Can’t be helped, huh...? Sure?”

And with that, the red ribbon tie slipped free with a soft swoosh, falling into the space in between the two of them.

[1]: Can't remember if I explained this nickname here before, but on the chance I didn't her adding the "Jun" in "Junyuushou" (じゅんゆうしゅー) makes the pun of having it pronounced like "準優勝," which literally just means "runner-up." You know since Yuusho was always 2nd to Masachika in their piano recitals and how Nonoa was present all the while.

And yes there is an added second "ー" after "しゅ," hence "Yuushou" as opposed to "Yuusho" (she uses this when dropping the "Jun" part).

[2]: Holy shit this is peak levels of autism. "Ooooh, look at me!!! I'm so mysterious; I'm special!!! Haha I'm so broken!!!" Can't fucking wait for the "step on me!!!" attention seeking losers to delude themselves into being attracted to such a type of corny character because they just wanna be different from the "normies."

[3]: Bro this wannabe psychopath gig is getting old. No one with even a somewhat below average IQ is falling for this shit cuh.

[4]: Slang that stands for "no good," standing for things that are off limits. Miyabi's essentially saying that she isn't taking any restrictions or refusals in regards to her payment.

Chapter 2 - Finding the Mastermind

“Sorry for calling you in so early, Tsukamoto-senpai.”

“Ah, no. It’s fine, but...”

It was early the next morning. The piano club’s vice president, Aoi Tsukamoto—having found herself being summoned to the student council office—shrunk her shoulders uncomfortably as she looked toward Alisa.

Despite the fact that she had been used by Nonoa as well as... some unknown individual who’d become her pawn, the fact remained that—even if it had been to protect the piano club—Aoi had falsely accused Alisa and Ayano of wrongdoing. Now that the student assembly had been adjourned and her club’s continued existence had been provisionally decided, all that remained in her heart was an immense sense of guilt.

“Um, once again, I’m really sorry, Kujou-san. For almost framing you at that student assembly,” she said.

“About that. We’ll be considering the matter settled on the condition you cooperate in catching the person who incited you, Senpai,” Alisa replied after staring quietly at Aoi as she bowed deeply in apology. “I have my apologies too, Senpai. For cornering you in order to uncover the conspiracy.”

“Ah, no, that’s not... I was the one who threw the punch first...”

Her apology only made Aoi look even more ill at ease.

“Alright,” Masachika cut in between the two from the side, seeing that they were about to spiral into an endless exchange of sorrys. “We don’t have a lot of time; I’d like it if we got started right away... Could you look through this student registry and tell us if there’s anyone who looks like the female student that incited you, Tsukamoto-senpai?”

Faced with a thick stack that was the student registry as it was dropped onto the desk with an audible thud, containing the profile of every single high school student at Seirei Academy, Aoi visibly hesitated. She then timidly glanced up at Masachika.

“Um, like I said yesterday, I’ve only met her once...” she spoke. “I don’t remember her face *that* clearly... or rather, we had that deal that she’d join the piano club as long as I followed what she wanted me to do. But I guess it’s like that’s never happened now, huh...?”

Thinking about the mysterious female student who had never shown herself again since that one encounter, Aoi gave a wry smile, kicking herself over how foolish she had been to fall for it.

“Even so, you’re the only one who’s had contact with her at this point, aside from the eight other perps, Tsukamoto-senpai... So, even an ‘I guess this person kinda looks like her?’ is good enough. We’ll have to go through everyone one by one anyway,” Masachika explained.

“Oh, really...? I’ll take a look then, but... don’t get your hopes up too much, okay?”

Reiterating that caveat, Aoi picked up the student registry and began to carefully examine the photos present. Casting a sidelong glance at her as she did, Masachika looked past Aoi toward Sumire. Maybe due to the fact that it was early into the morning and her hair had been freshly styled, her curls looked livelier than ever.

“The disciplinary committee’s already started its own investigation under Sarashina-senpai’s command, amirite? Violet-senpai.”

“It’s Sumire, I’ll have you know!^[1]” Sumire delivered her expected comeback, before then answering with a sigh. “We’ve squeezed the eight perpetrators yesterday, and have a lead on who this mastermind of ours might be based on their testimonies. We’re splitting up to check on our top suspects as we speak.”

“Moving fast, aren’t ya...?”

Yuki and Ayano had also happened to cooperate in carrying out such an investigation as well. However, given the eight perpetrators were among the more radical of the former's supporters, Masachika and Alisa hadn't joined in the questioning, instead turning to Aoi for her cooperation and deciding to conduct their own independent investigation.

...Or at least, that was only half of the official excuse.

In reality, their real reason for acting independently was to identify the mysterious female student before anyone else. And then, in exchange for not exposing her, to demand that she never again cooperated with Nonoa.

We'd be opening a can of worms if we did expose her, and run the risk of it coming out that Nonoa's the real mastermind... Masachika thought. But oh well, I guess it's still questionable that she'd leave any crucial evidence in the hands of someone acting as her pawn.

Even so, for him—someone who didn't want Nonoa's betrayal to come to light—neither reporting the girl nor allowing anyone else to seize her was desirable.

It was for the same reason that he would have preferred to avoid any outside interference in this own little independent investigation of theirs... But, given he couldn't explain their true motives at all, the moment Sumire said, quote unquote, "I'd like to cross-reference Tsukamoto-san's info with that of the eight perpetrators," he couldn't say no at all.

That being said, the moment he realized that she would be tagging along, he had at least taken some precautions.

"By the way... why's Yuusho-san here?" Sumire asked with a tilt of her head, glancing toward her cousin whom Masachika had summoned as that very "precaution."

"Why, you ask...? Why, as the piano club president, isn't it only natural that I'd want to catch the person who'd directed all that malice at us, Sumire-neesan?" said cousin in question responded, casually brushing up his bangs as he did.

"Yuusho-san... Were you always this virtuous?"

That was right: Sumire coming meant that Yuusho would too.

They could naturally steer things into splitting up the work by calling him in, after all. That is, having Sumire do her whole investigation with Yuusho. With that, Masachika and Alisa would be free to move independently.

And so, after about thirty minutes later, Aoi—having quickly gone through all the photos—looked up with little confidence.

“I’ve picked out the ones that seem likely for now, but...”

“Thank you very much. How many are there?” Masachika asked.

“Twelve in all, hm?” Alisa—who had relentlessly snapped photos of the selected suspects with her smartphone—answered his question while checking the images.

“Which ones?”

“Ah... *These* people,” Sumire uttered in her usual refined tone, placing a hand thoughtfully against her mouth as she peered at Alisa’s phone. “*Hrm...* nine of them are those we’ve already singled out on our end.”

“Oh, then that means our mastermind’s probably just one person rather than several. Ain’t that right?”

“That is indeed correct. The fact that our testimonies were so consistent too...”

“Could you point out which nine those are, just to be safe?”

“Yes. With pleasure.”

With the exchanging of information being completed, Masachika made a proposal in as casual of a tone he could manage.

“Well then,” he started. “Us showing up in too large a group would probably get them all suspicious; how ’bout we split into two?”

“That sounds good. Ah, Kiryuuin-senpai. Will you be going with someone from the disciplinary committee...?” Alisa promptly asked, with Sumire shaking her head from side to side.

“Not really? I’ve already shared all the info with Onee-sama and the rest at the committee; there’s really no particular need to regroup.”

“In that case, Kiryuuin-senpai, is it alright to ask you to go together with Kiryuuin...? Yuusho-san, I mean.”

“Yes, that would be best, wouldn’t it?” Sumire agreed. “Here we go now, okay, Yuusho-san?”

Masachika mentally threw a fist pump at her easy acceptance.

...Only for Yuusho to make an unexpected move right at that moment.

Brushing up his bangs with a faint smile, and for reasons only known to him, he held his hand out toward Aoi.

“Right then, would you help out with our investigation? Vice Prez,” he asked.

“Huh? No way in hell.”

He was rejected right on the spot.

Casting an exasperated look at her cousin, who stood frozen with the corners of his mouth twitching, Sumire briskly turned on her heel.

“Come on, we’ll have to question a few people before morning homeroom starts.”

“But Vice Prez has actually met the person in question; isn’t there just no way to figure out who our culprit is without her...?”

“You can at least tell who’s hiding what by their reactions, can you not?”

“*You* might be able to, Sumire-neesan, but for us normal people, unless it’s really obvious—”

“Stop complaining. Here we go now, okay?” Sumire cut Yuusho off sternly.

“Yes.”

She then ushered him out of the student council room.

“No, seriously, why’d he think he’d get an okay?” Masachika muttered under his breath as she did.

“Who knows? Maybe he assumed girls would just nod along if he’s the one inviting them.”

“...You’re pretty harsh on him, aren’t ya, Tsukamoto-senpai?”

“Course I am, aren’t I? There’s *nothing* ’bout him to like.”

“*Ahaha...*”

Thinking about Aoi’s situation, Masachika couldn’t help but feel that she was understandable. Still, hearing it being stated so bluntly like that made even him feel a twinge of sympathy for Yuusho...

“Oh well, anyway... Twelve people, huh? Some of them might not be in today, so it’s not like we can check on everyone in a single day too...”

“We’ll just have to do it one by one over a few days then, won’t we...? As for now, maybe we’ll start with the second-years since we’d be more likely to find her among them?”

“Hmm~. You *can* fake your grade by swapping what ribbon you’re wearing, so we can’t count on it much... Shouldn’t we start by tacklin’ the smaller groups first?”

“Well I s’pose that’s true, right? Then, should we start with the first years? Is that fine with you as well, Tsukamoto-senpai?”

“Yeah, I guess that’s fine...”

And so, following such a brief exchange, Masachika and Alisa, together with Aoi, set about questioning their suspects one by one.



“Um, sorry to bother you so suddenly. Could we have a moment?”

“Yes? You mean me—oh my, Kujou-san?”

“Yes. Um, I just wanted to ask... Does anyone who’s good at makeup come to mind?”

“Someone who’s good at makeup...?”

The trio were at their very first person: a first-year girl in Class 1-A who happened to be in the hallway.

Though she looked utterly bewildered by Alisa’s sudden question, it did have a purpose.

According to Aoi’s testimony, the mysterious female student had worn full makeup, something rare at a school where only makeup light enough to not draw a teacher’s attention was the norm. She had likely worn it as part of her disguise, but it was hard to imagine that she would have entrusted actually applying it to someone else. Following that reasoning, such logic only meant that said mysterious girl was skilled at makeup... and since “We suspect you’re the culprit” was definitely something the three could not bring themselves to say face-to-face, Alisa’s question simply fell under the pretense of an informal inquiry.

Still, she should show some sorta reaction upon seeing Tsukamoto-senpai if she really is out culprit here, Masachika thought as he carefully observed the girl’s reaction from behind.

However, even after noticing Aoi and him, the girl showed no particular suspicious recoil at all. After seriously chewing over the sudden question from strangers that she had barely—really barely—ever met, she named three people.

“Understood. Thank you very much,” Alisa said.

“You’re welcome...” the girl replied. “Are you maybe interested in makeup, Kujou-san? I feel like you wouldn’t need any at all with how beautiful you are.”

“Ah, no, this isn’t for me, but... in any case, thank you.”

“Oh, not at all. Glad if I could be of help.”

Leaving it at that, the girl bowed and walked away with a gentle smile.

“...She’s a really nice person, huh?” Masachika couldn’t help but comment.

“She was,” Alisa agreed. “So... what do *you* think, Tsukamoto-senpai?”

At her question, Aoi slowly shook her head from side to side.

“...I don’t think it’s her. The way she spoke, her voice, everything was completely different... Besides, the female student I met was a little slimmer too. At least I felt like she was.”

“Then it’s probably not her, hm...?” Masachika mused. “I mean, she didn’t get weird when she saw us either, right? Like, averting her eyes for example, or letting her gaze wander too.”

“So what about the three people she mentioned, Masachika-kun? The ones she said were good at makeup?”

“I’ve written their name down for now; guess we’ll check their photos again later, huh? We’ve still got eleven more people to go through right now, after all...”

Just as Masachika was starting to feel gloomy about how long this was going to take, the truth was that—spoiler alert—they wouldn’t need to question all eleven suspects.

The thing is, Aoi had initially picked out her suspects based solely on portrait photos. However, once they actually saw said suspects in person, it became painfully evident that a lot of them had figures clearly different from the mysterious girl they were after, or had faces that now looked different from what they had looked like in their photos. For example, some had become more plump, while others had acne bad enough that makeup couldn’t hide, and so on...

Only three out of the twelve suspects that Aoi had singled out were first years. Of the remaining two, one was dismissed without even needing to approach them. And so, by the time they’d finished checking all the first years, they still had fifteen minutes before morning homeroom began.

“That wrapped up faster than I expected... Right, next up’s the third-years, judging by the numbers, but...” Masachika muttered, trailing off at the end.

“They are, right? Should we do them during lunch break?”

“No, everyone leaves their classrooms once that starts; it’d be hard to tell where anyone is... I’d like to use the breaks in between too. Not for every single class, obviously, but...”

Glancing hesitantly at Alisa and Aoi and receiving both their nods, the trio agreed to continue their investigation during the ten-minute break between the second and third periods.

“In that case, it might be better to go with the second-years next, considering walking time and all. They’re kinda our main suspects anyway,” Masachika suggested.

“That’s true, isn’t it?” Alisa agreed

“I’m fine with that too,” Aoi said in tow. “Or rather, shouldn’t we go *now* in that case? We’ve still got around thirteen minutes.”

With Masachika and Alisa nodding at her suggestion, the three of them hurried over to the floor where the second-year classrooms were gathered.

And then...

“Oh my~? Alya-chan? Kuze-kun? What are you two doing here~?” a voice called out to them.

It belonged to none other than Maria, whom they ran into by chance on the stairs.

“Morning, Masha-san. Uh, we’re just looking for someone regarding yesterday’s student assembly, that’s all,” Masachika said only that before trying to leave...

But unfortunately for him, there was no escaping her.

“Looking for someone?” Maria asked. “Could it be they’re a second-year?”

“Yeah, well...”

“Alriiiiight, I might be able to help~. Who’re you looking for, by the way?”

“Eh?”

Caught off guard by her unexpected offer, Masachika reflexively looked to Alisa, who in turn showed Maria her phone, albeit looking a little flustered herself.

“Ohhh, that’s Miume-chan, right?” Maria nodded once after looking at the photo taken from the student registry. “That’s perfect. She’s my friend; want me to introduce you guys to her?”

“Eh, really?” Alisa murmured, her eyes widening in surprise.

Masachika shared her shock, though there was no reason to accept her help if that was true.

“No, rather than introducing us to her... it’d be fine if we just watch you talking to her from behind, Masha-san,” he told her.

“Eh? That’s all you need?”

“Yes. We just wanna see her face and hear her voice.”

“Hmm~? I don’t really get it, but okay. Alrighty, follow me, ’kay?”

Exchanging glances with Alisa and Aoi, Masachika then followed Maria as instructed, who casually stepped into another class’s classroom before calling out to the girl they were looking for as she was chatting with her classmates.

“G’morniiiiin’ Miume-chan~♪”

“Hm? Ohhh~, Masha! G’morniiiiin’. What’s up this early?”

The two then naturally clasped their hands together while exchanging extremely friendly hellos. It was only a moment after that the girl caught sight of the three standing behind Maria, blinking several times.

“Oh, and these three?” she asked. “Your li’l sister, her partner, and...?”

“Ah, don’t worry about them, okay~? They’re just here to observe.”

“What d’you mean observe...?” the girl smiled wryly, deciding not to dwell on it too much, seemingly used to hearing Maria say odd things.

After a brief moment of light chit-chat, Maria flashed her trademark bright, friendly smile.

“Thanks for the chat~,” she chimed. “Talking with you after so long’s made me suuuper happy, Miume-chan♪”

“Oh, reaaally? Thanks.”

“*Mm*, c’ya later~” Maria waved with both hands, receiving a wave back from the girl with a smile in response.

The moment they stepped out the hallway, she then glanced toward Masachika.

“Was that okay?” she asked with a slight tilt of her head.

“No, it was more than enough,” he replied. “What do you think, Tsukamoto-senpai?”

“I don’t think it’s her,” Aoi slowly shook her head with a troubled expression in response. “It was hard to tell since her hair’s covering her jawline in the photo, but it didn’t look as prominent as the one *that* girl had.”

“That so...? Right, on to the next one then.”

“There’s still more~? Who is it?” Maria perked up.

“Uhhh, this girl...” Alisa said, with Maria nodding yet again as she showed her her phone for the second time today.

“Ohhh, she’s my friend too. This way.”

“Eeeeh?”

“No way.”

Leaving the trio right in shock, Maria drifted to yet another neighboring classroom, glanced around the room again, and asked a nearby student a question before quickly coming back out.

“Sorryyyy~, looks like she’s not here yet.”

“Ah, no, that’s totally fine...”

“I’ll introduce you guys to her later, ’kay? So, who else?”

“Um, this girl...”

“*Mm*, she’s my friend too~” Maria nodded yet again as she saw the phone Alisa held out.

“Hol’ on, Masha-san, don’t you have way too many friends!?”

“*Do* iiii~? Well, I mean, I guess I do make a point of eating lunch in the cafeteria with someone I don’t know at all once a week; maybe that’s it?”

“What an actual living embodiment of communication skills...!!!” Masachika couldn’t help but cry out, shuddering at her absurd social prowess.

Alisa, apparently unaware of this side to her sister as well, stared at her with eyes wide open.

However... the real shock was yet to come.

They showed her the fourth photo.

“Hmm~, I don’t know who she iiis~” Maria mused.

Well of course, right? the three pondered the same thought, feeling oddly relieved.

And yet... without even a shred of hesitation, Maria charged right up to what was supposedly a complete stranger, and after about only two or three minutes of conversation, they had already warmed up to each other.

“Is she a communication monster, or what...?”

“...”

“Your older sister’s really amazing, isn’t she?”

With the three half-forgetting their original purpose, unable to do anything but marvel at the sight as they watched from behind, Maria continued to chat away cheerfully with a girl she'd literally just exchanged "Nice to meet you"s with a few minutes ago.

Thanks to Maria's overwhelmingly reliable reinforcement, Masachika and the others would manage to make contact with all five of the second-year suspects during the morning and lunch break. The problem? None of the now-eight people they'd met so far had turned out to be the person they were looking for.

"That leaves us four third-years..." Masachika uttered. "We should be able to just get through them during the afternoon break at this pace, I think."

"And if we don't find her then?"

"Oh well, guess we'll hold a strategy meeting then..."

With a vague sense of unease hanging over them, the four headed for the third-year classrooms as the afternoon break rolled around. Here too, Maria's knack for having a wide network of friends was put to full use, with the group heading straight toward one of the girls who was said to be her friend from the remaining four.

"Wooooow~. Long time no seeee, Takatsudo-senpaiii~" Maria beamed.

"Huh? Masha-chan? Oh, and your li'l sis, and..." the girl who Maria called out to responded, trailing off as she let her gaze drift to the three behind her. "Ah," she slipped from her lips, "could it be... you're looking for that mastermind everyone's talking about?"

"!?"

"Ah, so it *really* is that," she then smiled, seeing Alisa react instantly.

Seeing it as something they couldn't just ignore, Masachika took a few paces forward to stand beside Maria.

"Excuse me for butting in. I'm Kuze, the student council's general affairs officer," he introduced himself. "Has something like that... already turned into a rumor by any chance?"

“Ehhh. Yeah, I mean, gossip about yesterday’s student assembly has already practically spread all over a while ago. I’ve also heard the disciplinary committee and Suou-san and her partner’s been looking for the mastermind...”

“Is that... so?”

It looked like the other side was no longer bothering to hide their objective...

Or maybe they simply couldn’t anymore.

I mean, it’s only natural that someone’s oughtta catch on if they’re dragging the perps around and questioning people all over the place, Masachika reflected. *No, maybe...*

It might be that Yuki was deliberately conducting her own investigation openly to prove her own innocence instead. It sounded like the more likely possibility now that he thought of it.

“Huh? Wait, does that mean... I’m being suspected out too?” the girl asked, pointing to her own face with mild amusement.

“I apologize. We’ve actually been going around and questioning students who look like this mastermind in question,” Masachika answered honestly, having watched his senior show no sign of being offended.

“Whoa, seriously?” the girl asked, still laughing and scratching her head without a shred of negative emotion. “Ehhh~, what do I do? Do I give an alibi, or somethin’?”

Faced with her demeanor, Masachika glanced over to Aoi, who in turn hesitated slightly before giving a small shake of her head.

Not her, hm...? Oh well, she’d have to be one hell of an actress if she really were the culprit and could still act like this, wouldn’t she?

With that in mind, Masachika decided to take the opportunity to ask this refreshingly good-natured senior of his a few more questions.

“There’s something I’d like to ask,” he started. “Regarding yesterday’s student assembly, what sorta rumors have been specifically going around?”

“Eh? What sorta rumors...? Uhhh, like, about how there had been a few students who’d tried to tamper with the votes to pin some kinda fraud on some student council officers? And that there’s this mastermind who had incited them, so now there’s a search going on to find them... Something like that?”

“Could you tell me about it a little more?”

“A little more? Uhhhh... Ah, right, right. That the students who got caught were allegedly targeting Kujou-san over there to get Suou-san elected?” the girl said, glancing toward Alisa. “I heard something along those lines too, I think?”

“...And what did you think when you heard that?”

“What did I think? I mean, well, enthusiastic supporters do go overboard sometimes, don’t they now?”

“And that there’s also some rumors that the person who incited said supporters was apparently actually Yuki Suou herself, right?” Masachika probed.

“Ehhh? No waaaay, no way. People are saying that?” the girl asked, bursting out laughing at the utter conspiracy that he’d voiced, something that hadn’t yet even become a rumor. “I don’t know her *that* well or anything, but Suou-san’s not the type to pull something that shady, amirite? Like, she wouldn’t be teaming up with the disciplinary committee if she *really* were the mastermind, right? I mean, *you’re* her former partner; shouldn’t you know that better than anyone else?”

“...Well, I guess that’s true, huh?” Masachika replied with a small chuckle, just as the girl then turned toward Alisa.

“Welp, sounds like you’ve got a lot going on, but... keep going at it, ’kay?” she said. “I’m personally rooting for ya, Kujou-san.”

“Eh? Th-thank you very much... But why?”

“Hm? It’s just... I can tell you’re really giving your all. Sparkin’ off with *that* Suou-san alone’s already impressive, y’know? Oh well, I’m graduating next April so I won’t be able to vote though.”

“...No, thank you very much. That really encourages me”

“Mm, keep goin’ at iit~. Gah, I just realized I ended up wrapping the whole convo on my own here. Was that okay?” the senior commented, going out of her way to be considerate despite having no obligation to humor them in the first place.

“No, it was more than enough,” Masachika said, smiling as he bowed his head honestly. “Thank you very much for sharing all that valuable info.”

“Thank you for your time,” Alisa parroted his gratitude.

“Thank you so much, Takatsudo-senpai. Let’s talk again sometime, okaaaay~?” Maria chimed.

“Yeah, c’ya.”

Having bid farewell to the senior who lightly waved, Masachika and the rest gave one final bow as they left Class 3-D’s classroom.

“She’s a... really great senior, hm?” Masachika commented. “We got to hear a lot of things from her too.”

“Right?” Alisa nodded.

“Wasn’t sheeee~? I love Takatsudo-senpai too♡” Maria carefreely declared, something Masachika couldn’t help but let his cheeks relax into a smile over.

“Oh!” her face then suddenly seemed to convey as she started to glance around restlessly, before then beckoning Masachika over with a subtle motion of her fingers.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“Ah, come this way for a sec...”

“?”

Following her gesture, Masachika moved a short distance away, allowing Maria to stretch up lightly as she tiptoed and leaned in close.

“*When I say ‘love,’ I don’t mean the same kinda love I have for you, you know, Saa-kun?*” she whispered into his ear in a sneaky hush.

“!?”

“My love for you is a speeECIAL kind of loooove. ‘Kay?”

Hearing such brain-melting words in her version of what was a serious tone, Masachika couldn't stop the blood from rushing toward his head.

He thought he was about to die.

“Hey, what're you two doing?” Alisa called out just then, furrowing her brows.

Casting a suspicious look at her sister who'd smoothly stepped back, she then shot a sharp glance toward Masachika, who was already steadily turning red.

“What? What did you do?”

“No, it's nothing...”

The shock to his brain was far too intense for him to come up with a good excuse on the spot.

“Mmm~, nothing that big of a deal,” Maria stepped in instead, wearing her usual easygoing smile as she spoke casually. “I was just saying that no matter how nice of a senior she is, he shouldn't go falling for her, you know? Takatsudo-senpai's already got a boyfriend, after all.”

“The heck? That's not something you need to whisper about in the first place,” Alisa remarked.

“Reeeally~? I was just thinking that... maybe it'd be better to not point out a boy's love too loudly, you knooow~?”

“Please don't call it 'love...' I didn't mean that she was a really great senior in *that* way or anything...”

“And you...” Alisa then honed in on Masachika again, looking at him with a look of half exasperation, half seriousness as he fanned his face with his hands. “What's with your face being all red like that...?”

“See! Talking about who they like and stuff's embarrassing for boys!” Maria smugly declared with a puffed out chest.

“...Is that really so?”

“...I mean, it’s not exactly you want the opposite sex to bring up at all, yeah,” Masachika tacked on.

“Hmm~?” Alisa hummed, giving off the vibe of being somewhat satisfied with their explanations.

It was only then did Masachika notice Aoi watching them on with an indescribable expression, seeming to have caught on to something. Clearing his throat lightly, he turned toward her.

“Pardon me for that. So, what d’you think about that senior back there, Tsukamoto-senpai?” he asked.

Returning a look as if she was tempted to comment on what had just happened for a few seconds, Aoi then closed her eyes once before scoffing lightly and giving him a troubled expression.

“She’s not it... I think,” she answered. “Her face and figure’s similar, but her overall vibe’s completely different...”

“That so? Oh well, I also felt she probably wasn’t the one from how she talked.”

“Yeah...”

With that, Masachika then turned to Alisa.

“That was great, ain’t it? Senpai back there’s rooting for ya,” he said with a slightly teasing smile.

“Yes, well... I guess,” Alisa, still wearing a faintly sharp expression, replied, looking diagonally upward in response to his half-joking remark. “Somehow hearing someone you don’t know at all... No, *precisely* hearing someone you don’t know at all cheer you on makes you want to try harder, doesn’t it?”

Her candid reaction made Masachika’s eyes widen for a moment.

“...That’s right,” he uttered as he returned to a soft smile, before then turning right back to Aoi and continuing. “Alright, that leaves us three people... We’ll be counting on you a bit longer, Tsukamoto-senpai.”

“Ah, yeah. Roger...”

Buoyed by their senior's support, the group energetically resumed their investigation.

However, in the end...

"No way man... I can't believe the last three would be completely out of the question without even having to call out to them," Masachika couldn't help but mutter as they reached an anticlimactic conclusion.

"Sorry, I guess..."

"No, it's not your fault, Tsukamoto-senpai."

Though the letdown admittedly felt especially sharp due to how fired up they had gotten, nothing could be done if Aoi could only declare "That's not her" the moment she laid eyes on their last three suspects. What was more... Masachika had been easily able to see why as she watched from beside her... Specifically, one had been too tall, another was pretty tanned, and the last was rather... on the whole, overweight.

In the end, after checking their initial twelve suspects, there hadn't been even a single student who had made Aoi go "This is her!", nor anyone whose reactions seemed suspicious to Masachika. At this point, the only silver lining they had came from the fact that neither Sumire nor Yuki had succeeded in finding and catching the actual culprit, which also suggested that the investigation on their respective ends had run into hiccups too.

"I'm really... sorry..." Aoi apologized once again.

"No, no, it can't be helped," Masachika dismissed the thought. "I already knew from the start that trying to find someone you've basically only met once from pure memory's not something that'd go well."

Those were his honest feelings. Or rather, to be entirely frank, Masachika had already been seventy percent sure that they wouldn't find her anyway.

"What do we do...? Should we go over the photos again in the student council office again after school?" Alisa suggested.

"Hmm... No, let's go check out that drama club thing that came up when we questioned that first-year."

“*Maybe someone from the drama club if it’s makeup?*” the very first girl they had questioned had told them, in response to Alisa’s original question.

Though her way of asking most likely didn’t come off as particularly serious, the girl’s answer had been incredibly convincing and had stuck with Masachika up to this point.

“I know the drama club’s president; I was thinkin’ of asking if they could give us a li’l time before they start practicing...” he explained.

“...All right. Please do.”

“Can you come along for this too, Tsukamoto-senpai?”

“Ah, yeah. That’s fine.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“Should I come toooo~?” Maria perked up.

“Ah, uh, either way’s fine, Masha-san...”

“*Hmph*, are you leaving me out?”

“Huh!? N-no, that’s not it... Well then, care to come with us?”

“*Mhm!*” Maria exclaimed, instantly flipping her pout to a beaming smile in response to whatever it was that had made her so happy, all the while Masachika exchanged a wry smile with Alisa.

And so, after laying the groundwork with the drama club’s president, the four of them visited the auditorium where its members were gathering after school.

“Alright, gather up!” the president boomed.

“““““Yes!!”””””

Responding to their call, around twenty club members hurriedly formed a circle and stood at attention, their hands clasped behind their backs.

As the four watched the unexpected scene—one that resembled that of an athletics team—the president glanced their way and spoke.

“Before we start practice, we’ve got a few visitors today,” they declared.

““““““?”””””””

As the club members reacted in silent yet visible suspicion, Masachika and the rest stepped up onto the stage at the club president's "By all means."

““““Excuse us,”””” the four of them voiced out, converging the collective gaze of the club members...

Hm!?

And at that instant, Masachika saw it.

Specifically, one of the female members quickly turning her face away as she noticed them. Could we please have a moment of your time?" he asked, starting with that.

“Not a problem. But only for five minutes,” the club president replied.

“Thank you very much; that’s plenty.”

Having exchanged brief glances with Alisa and Aoi, Masachika could tell that they had seen the same thing.

Oh, Maria? She didn't notice a single thing, so let's leave it at that.

That reaction the moment she saw us... Could it be she didn't want Tsukamoto-senpai to see her face? That was blatantly suspicious either way.

Without waiting for any signal, they began to walk toward said female club member in question, with Masachika questioning Aoi with his eyes and receiving her nod with a stern expression in return.

Her figure's not far off either... Could it be? Could it actually be her?

As he kept his nerves taut in an attempt to now show them, Alisa spoke to the girl.

“Um, excuse me,” she said.

“Y-yes!”

Her response came in an oddly high voice, as if deliberately off-key. Accompanied by a face stubbornly refusing to look their way.

“Um...?” Alisa called out again.

But this time, the girl slowly turned toward her, her eyes lowered.

Her face was plain and pale, far from the “glossy eye-catching beauty” that Aoi had described.

No, if anything, ain't a face like this easier to transform with makeup...? Masachika thought, still keeping his guard up as he stared at the girl's eyes.

And as they locked onto Alisa...

“Ah, what an amazing face!” the girl blurted out, nearly collapsing on the spot as her knees gave way before she scuttled backward in a flustered retreat.

All Masachika and Alisa could do was just stare, dumbfounded.

“U-uhhh?” the latter uttered.

“Mmm!” came the girl's aroused moan. “Your voice's so pretty! Crap, it's too powerful!”

Speaking so rapidly as her impressions spilled uncontrollably from her mouth, the girl then clung to another club member as if she were trying to use them as a shield. It was at this point that Masachika understood why she had turned her face away. His gaze turned lukewarm at the realization. Looking around, he saw the other drama club members watching the scene unfold with similar expressions.

“Ummm... And you are...?” Alisa asked, confused as she still tried to ask for her name.

In response, the female club member's eyes went wide, her face crumpling on the spot.

“A faaaaaaan~~~!!!”

“Wha...?”

“Yeeeeeeeees~~~! Sorryyy! You were just way too cool in yesterday’s student assembly; I was mooooooved~~~!!!”

“Th-thank... you?”

“Uwaaaaaah~~~! Your face’s amaziing~~~! It’s too beautifuul~~~!!!” the girl continued to wail her overflowing emotions with tears welling in her eyes, now practically collapsing as her knees gave out.

At a loss, Alisa turned toward Masachika with a helpless look. Yet, being given that look only troubled him as well.

“...Why don’t you just shake her hand for now, or something?” he suggested.

“Come on, I’m not a celebrity or anyth—”

“Is that okaaaay!?”

“Oh, so she *really* does wanna do that...”

Having suddenly regained the strength in her legs, the girl sprang upright. Albeit recoiling slightly in reaction, Alisa hesitated her right hand. The girl clasped it with both of hers in return, practically holding it up over her head in reverence as she snapped her face up with overwhelming emotion.

“Thank you very muuuuch! I’m cheering for you! I’ll definitely vote for you next yeaar!!!”

“Th-thank you... very much...”

“*How ’bout it?*” Masachika quietly whispered to Aoi behind the overwhelmed Alisa. “Anyone else who fits the bill?”

“Uhhh...”

After slowly scanning the drama club members’ faces, Aoi furrowed her brows.

“*Sorry,*” came her reply, still hushed in a whisper. “*I was thinking that maybe that club member would look different with makeup on... but everyone starts to look that way when I think that...*”

“Yeeeah...”

In the end, the only thing the group had ended up learning from paying a visit to the drama club was that Alisa had, without realizing it, gained an enthusiastic fan. In addition, the way she had handled her response to said fan had seemed to have raised her likability within the drama club as a whole as well.



“*Haaah...* It was all a swing and miss in the end, huuuh?”

Having checked in with the drama club, Masachika and the rest decided to part ways with Aoi for the day, with the remaining three heading straight to the student council office for a break.

Following yesterday’s student assembly, and having been worn out from running all over the place investigating today as well, Masachika collapsed onto the sofa and stretched deeply.

“Nnngh...! Aaah...”

Enjoying the pleasant sensation of his muscles being pulled tight throughout his body, he went limp for a while as he checked his phone.

“No word from the guys over at the disciplinary committee either... Looks like they haven’t caught anyone on their end too.”

“Seems so, hm?”

“Welp, things sure are tough, huh...? *Hup*,” Masachika grunted as he threw his momentum into swinging himself upright on the sofa. “Thanks so much for today, Masha-san. You helped us a ton...”

“*Mm~mm*,” Maria dismissed the thought. “Not at all~. Ah, I’ll make us some tea, *kay~?*”

Having been unbelievably reliable throughout the whole day, she smiled cheerfully without a hint of concern as she started to prepare the tea. Watching that big-hearted attitude of this senior of his, Masachika quietly found his respect growing for her... Maria, holding the tin of loose tea leaves, then suddenly seemed to realize something.

“By the way, what were you guys investigating today?”

“Gah!” Masachika exclaimed, letting out a sharp breath at a question that came far, far too late, with the respect he’d just built for her vanishing straight into thin air.

“Masha... You were doing all that without knowing...?” Alisa asked in exasperation.

“Ehhh~? But it’s ’cause no one explained it to meee~”

“That... might’ve been the case, but...”

Surely you’d have asked at some point... she almost said that thought out loud, pressing a finger to her temple as her eyebrow twitched before standing up with a weary sigh.

“I’m going to quickly get something sweet,” Alisa then announced. “Please explain it to her, Masachika-kun.”

“Ehhh...?”

“Ah, Alya-chan,” Maria called out to her. “Can you get something for ol’ Onee-chan too, pleeeeeease~? I want pudding.”

“...Yeah, yeah.”

Having casually dumped all the explaining onto Masachika, Alisa left the student council office. As she did, Maria—still making tea—tilted her head toward him.

“So then, what were you investigating?”

“No, well... how do I put this? Please just stay the way you are, Masha-san.”

“Reeeally~? Maybe I will if it’s you saying so, I gueeeess~”

Masachika, for some reason, just couldn't bring himself to explain things like masterminds and conspiracies to this senior of his. It wasn't something that particularly bothered Maria either, having nodded without showing any concern.

"Ah, I accidentally poured a cup for Alya-chan too. *Umm*, should I just put a lid on it?"

"Why not just make it again later?" Masachika suggested. "I'll take two of 'em if that makes things easier too?"

"Really? Alright, I'll take you up on that then," Maria said, bringing over a tray carrying a teapot and three teacups on it. "Okay, here you are."

"Thank you very much."

Taking the teacup from her, Masachika felt a belated twang of guilt for having her make tea for him as if it were second nature.

"I'm sorry, I guess... Even after you helped with the investigation and all."

"Eh? Ah, but it's not something to worry about? I did it because I wanted to."

"No, I'll definitely repay you for this," Masachika asserted firmly.

He then brought the tea close to his lips... only for Maria to sit down to his right and lean in close.

Hm? Ain't she kinda close?

No sooner had the thought crossed his mind than Maria pressed herself against him, for reasons known only to her, leaning toward his right ear.

"So? Is it good?" she whispered as if sharing a secret.

"Huh? Yeah, it's good, but... what's with the whispering?"

"Hmm~? I wonder if you've got sensitive ears, Saa-kun."

"No, it's not like they're sensitive... *Anyone* would react like this, wouldn't they?"

Despite having shivered slightly and edged to the left as her breath tickled his right ear, Maria leaned in just as much, pressing their bodies against each other even closer.

“Noooo, no, no, the heck are you doing?” Masachika squirmed. “What kinda game is this?”

“Hmm~, a whispering one?”

“What even is that!?”

Doing his utmost to divert his attention from the overwhelming presence pressed against his right arm, Masachika set his teacup back on the table for the time being.

Even so, Maria’s whispering continued unabated.

“Nufufu, this whispering game... kind of feels like we’re doing something naughty, doesn’t it?”

“I think this is already plenty naughty as is thouuuughh~~!?” Masachika squirmed as her breath continued to tickle his ear.

“Fufu, you’re so funny, Saa-kun.”

“Eek!”

Having felt a small laugh and a puff of breath blown straight into his ear, sending a shiver coursing right through him, Masachika tried to stand up, unable to take it anymore.

But at that very moment...

“Awww. Geez, Saa-kun, you’re so cuuute~♡” Maria sang, jumping at him from the side and hugging him tight, throwing him off balance and sending him toppling to the left.

“Hey!?”

“Kyaaa!” she cried out as they fell.

“W-whoa!?”

Though a momentary sensation of floating made him freeze in fear, Masachika was only thankfully pushed down onto the sofa, his head landing right by the armrest, unharmed in the end.

“That was close...”

“*Ehehe*, my bad,” Maria teased, sticking out her tongue as she apologized while draped over Masachika, before once again raising a hand beside her mouth before leaning in toward his ear.

“No, why’re we still doing this whole whispering game at a time like this!?” he exclaimed.

“*Because you’re cute, Saa-kun?*”

“Eeek! You’re giving me shivers!” Masachika exclaimed once again, shaking his head vigorously as a shudder ran down his back.

Pouting her lips at his reaction, Maria then suddenly broke into a smile as if she’d thought of something.

“Riiight,” she hummed. “You said you’d repay me earlier, right?”

“Huh? Ah, yes... Wait, don’t tell me...”

Looking up as a shiver ran down his spine, for an entirely different reason than before, Masachika met Maria’s mischievous yet seductive smile.

“Alrighty. Instead of thanking me, you’re gonna have to endure this... until Alya-chan comes back, ’kay?”

“I’ll die, you know!?”

“Kaaaay. Here we go!” she beamed, her smile carrying an unusual hint of allure as she slowly drew closer... her hot breath brushed against his earlobe. “*Let’s start, ’kay?*”

“*Eep!*”

Scrunching up his neck as he curled in on himself, Masachika desperately tried to endure the ticklish sensation that felt as if his spine was being licked.

“Ufufu, *are you trembling? How cute*♡”

Nuuoooooghh! What’s with this live ASMRRRR~::~!?

It was an utterly and completely different level than any ASMR audio he'd once listened to with earphones. He could physically feel her breath, after all. But more than that, her body pressed against his right side emanated a strong heat, texture, and scent.

The physical presence of the woman named Maria assaulted him with a violently dense intensity.

“Hey, doesn’t whispering like this with just the two of us make you remember the old days?”

Uoooooh! Now’s the time, Alya-saaaaan!

Wishing more fervently than ever for his partner’s arrival, Masachika shut his eyes and clenched his teeth as he continued to endure Maria’s assault.

Squirming endlessly as his caressed ears, trembling ear drums, and a sweet, pleasant voice all tickled his brain, he endured it with everything he had.

【I looove you, Saa-kun~♡】



A dozen or so minutes later.

“I’m... back...?” Alisa announced her return with confusion.

“Ah, welcome back, Alya-chan♪”

“.....”

Having returned to the student council office, what she now saw was Masachika, slumped over as if his soul had been sucked out through his ears, and Maria, who—in a stark contrast and for some reason—brimmed with life.



[1]: As explained in previous volumes, Sumire (すみれ) literally means “violet,” hence why Masachika calls her that. We’re also localizing her whole “desuwa” schtick from here on out. Well technically I started doing that with Behind The Scenes but like everyone’s forgotten about it (or at least I certainly have :3).

Chapter 3 - More Than That, It's Crossdressing!!!

The following Saturday.

A day which, by chance, all the student council members, along with Sumire, Yuusho, and Aoi—a large ten people in total—had gathered in the student council office, the atmosphere heavy with deadlock.

Amidst such a tense atmosphere, Touya—who hadn't participated in the actual investigation himself, but had come to check on things as the person responsible for the student assembly—was the first to break the silence.

“*Haaah*,” he sighed. “...So, no one was able to find anyone who fit the bill in the end. That's what you guys are saying?”

“That we are, hm?” Masachika confirmed. “I mean, worst case scenario, there's also the possibility that it could've been someone from outside school, or maybe even a student from the junior high... It can't be helped if it just can't be helped, I guess.”

Considering the level of security in this school, the chance of it being a complete outsider was low. But still, that didn't mean it was entirely impossible for a student from the school's junior high to come into the high school building, change into a high school uniform, and pretend to be a second-year. That was something they all had considered before the investigation had truly begun, but expanding the search to include the junior high would simply just increase the number of suspects they had to check in with by far too much, so that line of inquiry had been ruled out.

I mean, it's not like we really intended to seriously hunt down the perp to begin with anyway...

But of course, this still regarded Nonoa's crucial pawn... If anything, she might as well be practically her right hand, so there was no denying that there was still a desire to keep an eye on such a mysterious female student. But more than that, for Masachika, making sure that no one else captured her was more important. In fact, given that both Yuki and the disciplinary committee had still yet to get to her, he actually even thought that this was the perfect point to just call off the whole investigation altogether.

And it's probably the same for Yuki too, he contemplated.

Yuki had originally wanted to catch the mysterious girl because the already existing circumstantial evidence had put her in a position where she herself was being suspected of being the mastermind. But now, with the investigation having progressed to the point where she realized that there were far fewer people suspecting her than she had initially anticipated, she didn't really have much reason left to desperately pursue who it truly was.

So that leaves the disciplinary committee led by Sarashina-senpai, huh...? Masachika deduced. Now then, I wonder just how we're gonna get them to call off their investigation?

Just as he was secretly thinking that, the very person in question, Chisaki, suddenly raised her voice as if to change the mood.

"Ahhh~, geez! Alright! Let's at least compare our intel for now!" she declared. "Each of you, who did you all investigate? What were your impressions of them?"

At her request, Maachika, Alisa, Yuki, and Ayano each shared who they had looked into, including their impressions.

After jotting all that information on the whiteboard, Chisaki then rested her chin on one hand as she fell into thought.

"Um, Sarashina-senpai," Masachika then spoke up.

"Hm? What's up?"

“Right, to be honest, I think the chances of finding our perp here’s pretty low even if we were to continue this investigation. And more than that, I’m actually more worried about the side effect that’s come from it...”

“The side effect?”

“Right. It’s actually looking like news of this investigation of ours spreading among the students has started something like a manhunt between them...”

And this wasn’t really a lie.

Sure, though what Masachika had actually seen was just nothing more than female students playfully poking at each other with teasing like, “You’re the mastermind, aren’t youuu~?” and responses like “Ehhh~? No wayyy~,” there was no guarantee it wouldn’t escalate from the level it was at now.

“It’s still fine as long as it stays as just jokes, sure. But if our investigation drags on like this, then I’m scared that we’ll just be stirring suspicion and paranoia among the students, and that’ll lead to false accusations—or maybe even bullying—toward the ones we’ve already and *will* investigate,” he reasoned.

“That’s...”

In truth, a failure shared amongst everyone involved in this whole investigation. This world was full of people who’d spread baseless rumors and treat someone like a criminal just because the police had come to question them, after all. Had they truly cared about protecting the female suspects they had investigated, then they should have absolutely kept it a secret that they were under suspicion from the get go.

“I mean, I don’t intend to let any bullying happen as long as I’m around...” Chisaki remarked. “But that’s definitely quite a problem, right...?”

“Isn’t it? I really think it’s better we try to settle things before the whole situation gets blown out of proportion.”

“Hmm~. And specifically?”

“The smoothest way out I can think of would just be to say that we’ve caught someone matching the perp’s description, but then, like, say we had to release them due to insufficient evidence, I guess?” Masachika suggested. “That way, we don’t have to specify who it was, and people’s interests should wane away once they hear that they’ve been caught, amirite? Plus, if we set the length of their ‘interrogation’ to be longer, after being caught by you guys at the disciplinary committee, of course, then that directly serves as an alibi or proof of innocence for the other students we’ve already gotten to.”

“I see... Hmm~. But saying we caught someone when we didn’t is...”

“If we do catch the real perp later, then you can just say that the whole thing ’bout capturing the perp before had been a false flag, simply meant to make the real perp lower their guard, y’know? Because above all else, shouldn’t our top priority be preventing any innocent students from being suspected here?”

“Nnngh~~~... nnggh~~~”

Groaning in thought at Masachika’s smooth persuasion, Chisaki finally nodded after a brief moment.

“...Alright. We’ll go with Kuze-kun’s plan.”

“Onee-sama!” Sumire exclaimed, immediately protesting. “You’re really giving up on capturing the culprit after *only* a day and a half of investigation!?”

“It really just can’t be helped... We’ve lost this the moment we failed to catch them early on. Oh well, let’s call it settled by publicizing the culprit’s description and issuing a warning.”

“...I humbly acknowledge,” Sumire reluctantly accepted, ensuring to maintain her elegant, archaic tone.

With that, Masachika struck a fist pump in his heart.

Alright, with this, the disciplinary committee has called off their investigation too. Nonoa’s betrayal’s no longer coming to light.

Still, just to be sure, he took a peek at Alisa's expression. He had explained beforehand that this was the direction he had intended to steer things toward, in order to ensure she wouldn't be dissatisfied...

Or so he thought. At that exact moment, Alisa raised her hand.

"I'm sorry. About that, could we make it so that Kimishima-san is the one who 'catches' this 'culprit'?"

"Huh?" Masachika uttered in surprise.

"Alya-san?"

"!?"

Both Yuki and Ayano were also taken aback by her unexpected statement, which might have well been an act like throwing a bone to the enemy. However, with no hesitation caught in her unwavering expression, Alisa apologized to Masachika through her eyes before continuing.

"This whole matter didn't escalate thanks to you, Kimishima-san," she said, turning her gaze toward Ayano. "I believe we should, in some form or another, at least give you proper recognition for that."

It was a proposal declared with a proud figure, with Alisa asserting herself with such a commanding presence that even Chisaki and Sumire could only stare in surprise, as if overwhelmed.

"O-ohhh, yeah, that's right," the latter then spoke after a few moments, albeit with a slightly drifting gaze. "Let's go with that, then?"

"If you're saying so, Alya-san..." Yuki agreed. "That's alright, right? Ayano."

"Yes."

Seeing Ayano nod, Touya then lightly cleared his throat.

"Alright, got it. In that case, I'll make that announcement on behalf of the student council. Right then, specifically—"

"Ah, Prez, could you hold on for a moment?" Yuki raised her hand sharply just then, her unexpected move causing Masachika to raise his guard slightly.

“What’s the matter, Suou?”

“My apologies for interrupting you, Prez. I have no objection to that decision either; however, there’s one more thing I’d like to investigate before that.”

“Hm? What?” Chisaki asked in Touya’s place, prompting Yuki to smile sweetly before she continued.

“Yes, there’s something I thought to myself after listening to Masachika-kun and Alya-san earlier,” she proclaimed.

“Eh?”

Watching Alisa frown in confusion, Yuki then smiled meaningfully.

“They had mentioned the drama club as a group full of people skilled at makeup... But if we’re talking about that, then there’s another very promising club in question, am I not right?”

It was at that moment that Chisaki’s expression turned grim, seemingly being the first to realize what she was getting at.

“You don’t mean... the handicrafts club?”

“Yes! Exactly! Don’t you think they’re worth investigating?”

And although both Sumire and Alisa seemed to reluctantly agree with such a suggestion... their reactions were hesitant.

Certainly, the handicrafts club’s makeup skills were very much exceptional. But still, with Masachika and Alisa personally—and Chisaki and Sumire as members of the disciplinary committee—knowing the handicrafts club well, they just simply couldn’t picture them being involved in some strange conspiracy.

Plus, simply put, they were just a group they did not want to get involved with.

Because they were scary.

“Well, I get what you’re saying, Yuki-chan, but...”

“Please wait. There’s still more to it,” Yuki pressed on in response to Chisaki’s clearly unenthusiastic voice.

“?”

“Earlier, Masachika-kun suggested that it’s possible that our culprit might be someone from the junior high... But aside from that, don’t you think that there’s another possibility as well?”

“...You mean a uni student?” Chisaki asked, tilting her head.

“If someone younger was a possibility, then someone older could be possible as well,” her tone practically conveyed.

Yet... all Yuki did was shake her head with a bewitching smile in response.

“No, that’s not it...” she refuted. “A man crossdressing as a woman. That’s a possibility too, you know?”

At her words, time froze for several seconds. As the eight others besides Yuki and Ayano all stood there with their mouths slightly agape, frozen in place, Yuki then honed her gaze on Masachika, Touya, and Yuusho.

“Don’t you think it’s a possibility worth verifying?” she suggested right as she did. “About just how close a crossdressing guy can get to being a real woman...? And just as it happens, not only does the handicrafts club have outfits, they have wigs too.”

It was finally at this point that Masachika finally realized her aim.

Th-this girl...!!!

Investigating the handicrafts club was just an excuse. It was nothing but an opportunity for her to make the three of them crossdress.

You little shiiiiit!! You’ve got zero intentions on seriously investigating this to start with, huh!? he screamed inwardly at his little sister, whose eyes clearly held a look of delight.

And just as he did, Maria clapped her hands together.

“Wooow!” she exclaimed. “That *does* sound great, riiight~? It sounds fun!”

“I ain’t doing it, okay!?” Masachika snapped, raising his voice in a bid to not lose to his senior’s cheerful smile.

And yet, all the girls ignored him as if they hadn’t heard a single thing.

“Oh I see... There’s some truth to that, hm?” Chisaki agreed.

“No, there ain’t even an ounce of it here, y’know?” Masachika quipped.

“C-calm down, Chisaki. Come back to your senses,” Touya pleaded as his girlfriend stared at him with glittering eyes.

“Hey, Yuusho-san,” Sumire perked up, honed in at her cousin with a sadistic smile. “I, for one, would like to see Scarlet-chan again. It’s been a long while, I’ll have you know.”

“Now that’s a name I’ve got no clue about,” Masachika quipped yet again.

“Ne-nee-san...” Yuusho protested.

“Huh? Kiryuuin, you had a thing for crossdressing?” Aoi asked, looking down at him with eyes brimming with nothing but contempt. “Gross.”

“No, wait a sec, Vice Prez! I never did, you know!?”

“Masachika-kun. I think sacrificing yourself for the sake of the investigation would be beautiful, you see,” Yuki reasoned, attempting to gently persuade her brother with a soft smile.

“That ain’t something the one *making* the sacrifice should say, y’know that, riiight!?”

Meanwhile, Ayano’s eyes fluttered with a faint glimmer of expectation.

“Ayano! Say something, will you!?” Masachika begged in response. “A-Alya!”

With his retreat being slowly steadily cut off, he then called out the name of the last remaining person who held on to a shred of conscience: his partner.

And yet...

“Masachika-kun... Testing this possibility is very important, I think.”

It was a line of such utter seriousness, in spite of the clear amusement in her eyes.

“Why the hell are *you* getting into it too!? Stop screwing about! I ain’t staying here any longer! I’m going home!”

Unable to endure the encirclement of girls harboring nothing but twisted desires, Masachika bolted from the spot.



“Please excuse uuuus~” Chisaki called out.

“Yeeees~...” came a response. “Wait, Chisaki Sarashina!? Wh-what d’you *want*!? We haven’t done anything today, y’know!?”

“That’s the same excuse you always give though, amirite...? Well, whatever. I’ve got a little favor to ask today, okay...?”

“A favor...?”

Having been welcomed with gazes on max alert the moment she appeared at the handicrafts clubroom, Chisaki gave a wry smile and, with her thumb, gestured toward Touya and Yuusho behind her, and Masachika as well. He had a lifeless look in his eyes as the two firmly grabbed him from either side, as if to say “You’re not getting away.”

“There’s a certain test we’d like to conduct, you see,” Chisaki explained. “Could you try having these three seriously crossdress just once?”

In an instant, the gazes of the handicrafts club members—which had once been full of wariness—all gleamed sharply at once.

“Ohhh. Crossdressing, you say?”

“It’s been a while since we’ve had this...”

“Finally, customers worth the effort...!”

Enveloped in some sort of ominous aura, the handicrafts club members slowly rose, surrounding the three boys, immediately sizing them up.

“Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. A body built like a brick wall, completely unsuited for crossdressing, and a very manly face... But that’s exactly what makes it great!”

“Just as I thought. Shall we go with a dreamy-cute [loli](#) outfit to make it super intense?”

“No, we could also deliberately play it safe with a tight sailor uniform...”

“Kiryuuin-san would probably look the best in crossdressing, hm? He’s got such a pretty face.”

“Hmm~, it feels like *anything* would look good on him, so it’s ironically hard to choose...”

“Still, he’ll be worth the effort to transform!”

“Kuze-kun’s gonna be the real test of our skills among them, amirite...?”

“But he’ll really transform with a full face of makeup. You think so too, right?”

“I’m somehow starting to get a li’l excited here.”

With the handicrafts club members fully motivated before they knew it, the three boys were each dragged off to their separate spaces, their uniforms promptly being stripped off.

Having already tried to escape earlier, restrained by Yuki and Ayano and persuaded—no, threatened—by Touya and Yuusho, insinuating if he was planning on running off on his own, Masachika had long already abandoned his sense of self. Now withered away to a state of resigned surrender, he had his blazer stripped off by the handicrafts club members.

Watching that scene, Alisa—who until then had an expression mixed in a sense of twenty percent apology, thirty percent curiosity, and fifty percent sadism—began to grow restless.

“Eh? Eh?” she stuttered in a climbing voice. “No way, the female members are the ones changing them...?”

“Alya-san?” Yuki called out to her in a tone that practically asked for the point of bringing such a concern up now.

However, the very girl she called out to didn’t look to be in any state to respond.

“N-nooooo... Don’t... touch him all familiarly like that...”

“No, aren’t they just taking measurements?”

【Even *I* haven’t touched him like that...】

“Sorry? What was that?”

Having forgotten that her older sister was present as well, Alisa slipped into a Russian whisper without thinking. And yet, that very sister of hers, Maria, was also staring at Masachika, her already large eyes gaping even wider and wider.

“Wa-wah!” she stammered with both hands covering her mouth, her face a bright red, also clearly in no state to worry about anything else either. “Aah, aaaaah...!”

Oh, what’s this? Some kinda new NTR? Yuki jested mentally, giving the both of them a look mixed with exasperation and curiosity as she could only watch Masachika being handled by the female club members with absolutely no restraint, flailing her hands in restless agitation.

Could it be... I’ll get to see Alisa lose her cool out of jealousy here?

Or so Yuki thought...

Because right before Alisa could explode, Chisaki reached her limit first.

“Waaaaaiit a seeeeec!!” she cried out. “I never said you could cling all over Touya like thaaaat!!”

Leaping forward as if to pounce, she plunged right in between the handicraft club members, sweeping both her arms wide to part the tide of girls aside and snatch Touya away from them.

“Keep your contact to the minimum!” she demanded, glaring around sharply as she pointed at them with a snap. “Changing happens in separate rooms! Non-negotiable!!”

““““Kaaaaaay~””””

At the disciplinary committee president’s decree, the handicrafts club members reluctantly dispersed themselves from the three boys. Seeing that, Alisa, and... Maria secretly as well, breathed sighs of relief.

Meanwhile, Yuusho glanced toward Sumire, as if expecting a similar reaction from her...

However...

“Ah, Kiryuuin-senpai. Your leg hair...” a handicrafts club member called out.

“Shaving it all off is perfectly fine, of course,” Sumire told her.

It was a green light given with absolutely zero hesitation: a casual seizure of complete authority over the life and death of her cousin’s leg hair.

Yuusho could only quietly look away in response.

Oh, he’s not crying here or anything, by the way. He’s a boy, after all. Sure, he was about to be dressed as a girl, but...

Ah, that’s just sweat coming out of his eyes there.



And so, about an hour later.

Alisa and others, who had been sent outside midway through, reentered the handicrafts clubroom, the club president having called for them. Stationed in front of the storage room where the costumes were kept, she then began her announcement.

“Ladieees aaaaand ladies!” she boomed into a nonexistent, imaginary microphone. “Thank you all for gathering, fair maidens. Allow me to present... a fashion show of three gentlemeeen~! Let it begin!”

“““““Wooooooh!!!”””””

At her words, the handicrafts club members, sitting with knees tucked to their chests, burst into applause and cheers all at once. Carried along by their enthusiasm, Alisa and the others gave a light round of claps as well, standing from behind.

“Now then, let’s get started at once! Entry number one! The sexy boss, Touya Kenzaki-san!!!”

With an audible click, the door to the adjacent room swung open, and Touya appeared.

...With no makeup whatsoever.

His hair was untouched as well, yet all he wore was nothing but an extremely tight china dress.

“““““Whoa, that’s brutal!!!”””””

“Physically brutal!”

“Visually brutal too!”

“It’s great! It’s just way too much!”

“It’s downright criminal, I tell ya!”

Relentless cheers (?) rained down from the club members as Touya walked forward proudly before them, chest puffed out as if he had already gone full circle and accepted his fate.

From the deep slit of his china dress—its symbolic embodiment—peeked his thick, hairy leg. His arms, extending outward from its sleeveless openings, were just as thick. Its bodice was stretched taut (by his pectorals).

“W-wait a sec! You said you’d seriously crossdress him, right!?” Chisaki protested with a restrained laugh, unable to hold back.

The handicraft club members, specifically a few who’d presumably been in charge of Touya’s crossdressing, then turned around to her and gave wry smiles.

“No, I mean, something like *this* just has a better charm when enjoyed as-is...” one of them explained, referring to Touya himself.

“And also, if we’re being serious, there just weren’t any female outfits that fit his body type...” another reasoned.

“This one too, actually. The zipper won’t zip; we had to close the back with safety pins, didn’t we, right?”

At those words, Touya turned around. And sure enough, they had given up with zipping it closed, with the dress being held together by safety pins providing the bare minimum of support instead.

His well-defined trapezius peeked out from the smooth satin fabric that shined with a beautiful luster.

“*Pfft!*” Chisaki chuckled.

“Chisaki!? That actually kinda stings, you know!?”

“No, sorry, it’s just a little... *Pfft!*”

“...Just move on to the next one already,”

Despite only agreeing to do this at his girlfriend’s request, all Touya got out of it was her laughter in the end. Shoulders slumped, he trudged over to the window.

“Aaaah, sorry, Touya! No, um, your muscles actually look good here? I think it suits you, really!” Chisaki exclaimed, hurrying over to desperately follow up.

Right after she did, the handicrafts club present resumed with the next announcement.

“Entry number twoooo! Cute is justice! Nothing else matters! The gothic lolita warrior, Masachika Kuze-kun!!!”

“!”

As Alisa straightened her back with a jolt at her announcement, the door opened... revealing Masachika, donning a long silver wig and a gothic lolita dress.

It was incredibly lavish and frilly, in complete black and white: the very essence of going straight down the classic, traditional path. His skin, as white as porcelain, stood out against the black of the dress, and his long eyelashes cast down in melancholy.

Even the handicrafts club members couldn't help but...

“You're doin' great, you're doin' great!”

“Not bad! Not bad at all!”

“It *barely* pulls off as long as you squint!”

“It'll somehow manage for sure if we just blast enough light on him!”

“You're not praising me, are ya!?” Masachika snapped back, facing the painfully honest evaluations thrown his way.

But still... the result was just so honestly hard to describe.

“*Whoa... This is even iffy than I expected~*,” Yuki whispered from under her breath. “*Yiikes~*”

Unlike in manga, there really was just no moment where he'd look into a mirror after putting on all that makeup and go, "Is this... me...?", or something like that, turning into a completely beautiful girl. His skin had been properly done up, sure. The masculine contours on his face had been softened, they'd applied some blush to his cheeks, and his eyelashes were even thickened. And yet, even then, they had ended up with the sort of result you could only react with something like "Oh, he's a girl now... No, actually, he's not really pulling it off, huh?" to. Even with the lace-heavy gothic lolita dress hiding his physique to some extent, you still just couldn't shake off the feeling. At this point, he was probably just fundamentally not suited for crossdressing at all.

"Yeaah~. His skin's smooth, so I thought that maybe we could just do a lot with it, but... yeah."

"It's more around the level of a male comedian crossdressing for a skin, I guess, right?"

"Could you all just stop with the serious critique already...?" Masachika grumbled to himself. "So unbearable. After all that effort too. Like, who the hell does this even benefit? Seriously..."

He trudged toward the window, struggling in the hard-to-walk-in outfit.

And then...

"Haaah, ah! Eeeeeek~♡! So cuuuteee♡!" a syrupy voice rang out, albeit belatedly, as if who it belonged to had suddenly snapped back to their sentences.

Everybody whipped around in shock. Paying absolutely no mind whatsoever to the stares all around her, Maria—with hearts practically flying off from her head—ran up to Masachika.

"Eeek! You're really cuuuteee♡"

"No, being praised so highly like that makes me feel... honestly iffy about whether I should be happy or not..." the latter let out a wry smile, met with the former pressing her cheek against his as she let out delighted squeals after another, taking selfies with him.

And just like that, crossdressed Masachika had casually been documented.

“““Ehhh...”” those around them involuntarily uttered, recoiling.

Even Alisa looked slightly put off by her sister’s sensibilities.

“Now then, at last, only one remains!” the handicrafts club president announced, raising her voice dramatically after clearing her throat. “Entry numbeeeeer... three! Our number one favorite! Magical girl, Scarlet-chaaaaan!!!”

The door then opened... and in came a ridiculously tall magical girl, striking a pose that might as well have been accompanied by an audible ta-da☆, his red twin-tails swaying with a swoosh. From beneath his frilly, fluffy skirt extended dazzlingly pale legs (freshly shaved), clad in pure white knee-highs. Aside from his physique leaning toward more boyish “blue” vibes than “pink,” being way too tall, what stood proud was nothing but a fairly convincing and beautiful magical girl.

“Cuuuteee!!”

“Whoa, so tall!”

“What beautiful legs! Wait, hey, that skirt’s too short!”

“This works! This totally works!”

The reactions from the handicrafts club members were clearly different from the previous two. So was how completely committed the crossdresser himself was.

“Oh my, you can surprisingly still pull it off, can you not?” his esteemed cousin—who was surely the cause for his over-the-top commitment—remarked with her arms folded, standing towards the back.

“Whoa...” Alisa uttered, half impressed and half put off with how properly presentable of a level Yuusho had been dressed compared to Masachika earlier.

“Man, this one’s hard to react to in its own way...” Yuki whispered, sharing the same expression.

As for Aoi...

“Gross.”

Blunt as ever.

“Scarlet-chan, look this wayyy!”

“Can I take a pic!?”

“Woowoow, so sexyyy!”

Seeing the handicraft club members getting all excited as if they were at some cosplay photoshoot from the corner of her eye, Alisa walked over to Masachika, still entwined to Maria in the corner of the room.

“Masha,” she called out. “How long are you planning to keep this up?”

“Ehhh~? But he’s sooo cuuute~”

“Just *how* is he...?”

“You’re really gonna say that so clearly right in front of me?”
Masachika complained, prompting Alisa to look at him again from up close.



“...Yeah, he’s not cute, isn’t he?”

Her impression didn’t change particularly much. At best, all she could really say was something along the lines of a “You tried your best, hm?”

“Ehhh~? Alya-chan, you’re so mean~,” Maria protested. “The effort he’s putting into trying to be cute’s part of what makes him cute, isn’t iiit~?”

“No, Masha, you feeling that way makes you in the minority.”

“I mean, yeah, even *I* know that, but y’know... it’s not like you had to come all the way here to see me...” Masachika remarked.

Seeing an utterly rare sight of him sulking like that, Alisa shot a faint, wry smile before shifting her gaze slightly away.

【Your bare face’s just more charming,】 she murmured from under her breath.

“Come again, Alya-chan?”

“Nothing!”

Having been almost caught by her sister, Alisa quickly turned her face away even more sharply in an attempt to cover up her actions. Immediately after, Masachika—who’d been completely expressionless up ’til this point—curled his lips into a mischievous grin.

“Huh!? What!? Alya, you’re saying you wanna try crossdressing too!?” he shouted, intentionally misunderstanding her words.

At his sudden outburst, all the handicraft club members, who’d been completely absorbed with Scarlet-chan, snapped their heads toward her in unison.

“*Eek!*”

Letting out a slight shriek at the slightly mortifying sight of every girl turning their heads at once toward her, their eyes completely wide open, Alisa instinctively stepped back. Spinning around, she shot a sharp glance at her grinning partner, before then turning toward the one person capable of physically controlling the situation at hand, Chisaki.

However...

“Crossdressing as a guy, huh...?”

“Eh, Touya...?” Chisaki called out in response to the president’s remark. “Um, are you, by any chance... interested in seeing me crossdress?”

“Hmm. I mean, I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t... No, honestly, I *am* interested.”

“Touya... Alright, should I maybe... give it a go?”

As it turns out, their oh-so reliable vice president and esteemed head of the disciplinary committee was too busy flirting with her boyfriend. And once she was on board, there was just no stopping this bunch at the handicrafts club.

“Okay then. Since we’ve got the chance, the rest of you too!” one member declared, immediately jumping at the opportunity.

“So, we’ve got the Kujou sisters, Kiryuuin-san, and Suou-san... Wait, huh? What about Kimishima-san and Tsukamoto-san?” another said, pointing out Ayano and Aoi’s disappearance.

“Oh, there’s Kimishima-san! Where’s Tsukamoto-san?”

“Eh, she ran away? When did that happen!?”

With Ayano swiftly roped in as well—having initially faded into the background by the wall—it was decided that the girls would be the ones to crossdress this time. All except Aoi, of course, who’d made a quick escape, having declared “Like hell I’m standin’ next to a lineup of beauties like this!”



“Whooooaaa, that figure’s as killer as ever... Truly the goddess of proportions...”

“Huh? Kujou-san... did your chest get a li’l bigger again?”

“It’s not just that, her hips look to have gotten bigger too...”

“And yet her waist’s the same... How?”

“Cause she’s a god.”

“Oh I seeeee~”

For who knows how many times now, Alisa found herself surrounded by members of the handicrafts club, bringing outfit after outfit to hold up against her.

“Ohhh~, this one here’s a li’l too short, huuuh~? Next!”

“Can we go ahead and flatten her chest first for now? Is that okay~?”

“Like hell we can, idiot. Leave her chest as is, leave her chest.”

“Huh? Are you deaf, or something? It’s literally called crossdressing. *Crossdressing!* A female crossdresser who keeps her chest is nothing but a woman wearing men’s clothes, isn’t she!?”

“Cut the shit! The whole point in getting her in male clothes is to have her huge tits push ’em up from below, something you can’t get with a man!!!”

“Don’t bark at me, you scum. Completely flattening her chest creates room for imagination like, say, ‘Could she actually have huge tits under there?’, you know? You utter shallow fool who’d jump at huge tits in an instant. Go look at some gravure idol or something and jerk off already.”

“Prez! Her H-cups! They’re not flattening!”

“What!? Don’t give up! Force ’em in!”

“I-it’s no good! It’s pushing ba—wa-waaaaaargh!!!”

“There you go, see!? The goddess of breasts has spoken: my huge tits shall not be crushed!”

These guys are scaaary... Alisa thought, abandoning any attempt to understand the handicrafts club members getting fired up over some otherworldly argument, staring off into the distance.

But then, at that moment, she noticed that the next female student bringing over the next outfit was someone she recognized.

“Oh...” she raised her voice in surprise.

“Ah, hey there, hey there,” the girl called back out to her. “Mind if I try fitting this on you next?”

“Yeah, that’s fine, but... uh, so you were here today, hm?”

“Ahhh,” the girl replied, reading her surprise. “I was just over in the back doing a li'l work until a moment ago.”

“So that’s how it was... Sorry about that, okay? For intruding so suddenly.”

“No, no, not at all. Oh, I was actually helping with Kuze-shi’s^[2] crossdressing earlier too, y’know? He really didn’t turn into much of a girl even with makeup on, though...”

“Ohhh~, so that was you.”

“Presumptuous as it was, yes...” she confirmed, momentarily switching to a fairly formal tone. “Ah, Kujou-san, I was actually thinking of doing your makeup later too. That alright?”

“Sure. Well... I’ll leave it to you then,” Alisa replied. “Uhhh...”

She then trailed off, leaving the female student to blink for a few times before shooting her a wry smile.

“Now that I think of it, I’ve never actually properly introduced myself, right?” the girl asked.

“Y-yeah...”

“Woow, what a blunder, what a blunder. How rude of me, how rude of me,” she apologized, striking a slightly playful tone.

With a light laugh, the female student then placed her right hand over her chest.

“Well then, from the top... I’m Miyabi Shikumagawa, also known as Slit-paisen. Looking forward to getting along with you.”



[1]: “ゆめかわな” (yumekawa), a slangy abbreviation of “ゆめかわい” (yume kawaii), literally “dreamy” and “cute,” hence “dreamy-cute.” A Japanese fashion style originating from the Harajuku district in Shibuya consisting of frills, pastel colors, and a fairytale aesthetic.

[2]: “氏” (-shi), an honorific usually used in formal speech used to refer to someone you’ve never actually met. It’s normally only used in academic journals or legal documents. This character’s obviously using it in a sarcastic/comedic tone here, as she’s done in previous volumes (not saying who she is here, you’ll see later).

Chapter 4 - Looks Like the Master-Servant Reversal Was a Misunderstanding

“Ayanooo~, it’s okay nooow~”

“Yes.”

It was currently the final day of the three-day weekend following the turbulent student assembly and the furious hunt for the mastermind. Ayano, who’d been ordered to wait in everyday clothes inside of Yuki’s room at the Kuze residence, stepped outside in response to Yuki’s call. Walking down the hallway, she then opened the door to the living room... and froze.

“Ayano! Great work on the spy operation!” Yuki chimed.

“Good job. Make sure to rest well today,” Masachika added.

Her two masters welcomed her with smiles. They were both dressed in... none other than a butler and maid uniform respectively.

“?????”

As mentioned earlier, Ayano was, at this very moment and having been instructed by Yuki, in an everyday outfit: a stark contrast to Yuki, who was presently dressed as a maid, and Masachika, who was dressed like a butler.

W-what... what sort of situation is this exactly? Ayano asked herself, still maintaining her polite tone despite her confusion.

Of course, her beloved masters were capable of wearing even servant uniforms with elegant perfection, and yet, saying it suited the both of them was something that Ayano herself wasn’t sure was appropriate.

But even before that, what was more pressing was that, with the present situation, it was almost as if... their usual positions had been reversed, and that she had become the esteemed young lady of the house.

“...??”

Faced with an utterly baffling situation, Ayano swept her gaze, looking for Kyoutarou, the head of the household, as if she were seeking help... However, he was nowhere to be found. Only then did she recall that he had gone off to the Suou household earlier at noon.

“You know what day it is today, Ayano?” Yuki asked, forcing her frozen brain to move and figure out what holiday today was.

“...Today is November 23rd: Labor Thanksgiving Day^[1], is it not?” Ayano answered, albeit after a short deliberation.

“Right! In other words, it’s the day to give our thanks for our servant’s loyal service, y’know!?”

“So with that in mind... we were thinking about doing our best to take care of you today, Ayano,” Masachika added. “Here, I even fried up some of your favorite donuts.”

“Go on, go on. Sit, sit.”

Urged by the both of them, Ayano stiffly sat down in the chair. In front of her was a deep plate, piled high with Masachika’s homemade donuts.

“Alright, here you are,” Yuki said, setting down a freshly brewed cup of tea.

“Itadakimasu...”

Still unable to fully process what was happening, Ayano brought the teacup to her lips as told.

“*Ghk!*? Hot!” she winced, having taken a sip of the tea without thinking, immediately pulling her lips away from the intense heat.

“Ah! Why didn’t you blow on it!? Onii-chan, ice!”

“R-right!” Masachika said, frantically getting a glass of cold water filled with ice and handing it to her.

“Th-thank you very much, Masachika-sama...”

With the tip of her tongue throbbing and stinging, Ayano immediately took a mouthful of cold water, along with a single ice cube, pressing it against where her tongue had been burned.

“Geez, Ayano, you’ve got to be more careful, you know? And also, no using ‘-sama’ today, ’kay?” Yuki whined, earning a silent questioning look from Ayano, who continued to press the ice against the inside of her lips with her tongue.

In response, Yuki raised her index finger sharply.

“Today, you’re calling us Yuki-chan and Chika-kun, just like in the old days!” she declared

“!?”

“Ah, and no polite speech either, ’kay?”

“!?”

Startled, Ayano nearly choked on her ice, instinctively about to spit it out before barely managing to stop herself at the last second.

“W-whoa, you okay? Did you choke?” Yuki asked, gently patting Ayano’s back with the palm of her hand, seeing her puff out her cheeks as her eyes darted around in a dazed confusion.

Somehow managing to avoid the rudeness of spitting out what had been in her mouth, Ayano used the time it took for the ice to melt to steady her thoughts.

“Uhhh, am I to take that as an orde—”

“No polite speech.”

“Auuhh...”

Despite being told that, the polite speech that had been so ingrained into her body wouldn't come off so easily. With no other choice, Ayano reluctantly turned her gaze to the donuts in front of her, putting off her reply.

“Itadakimasu...” she murmured, bringing her hands together before carrying a donut to her mouth.

Its crisp texture, unique to freshly fried food, immediately hit her first, followed by the warmth of its fluffy dough melting on her tongue, spreading a gentle sweetness throughout her mouth.

“*Fwaaah...*”

Without thinking, a blissful, ecstatic sigh slipped from the back of her throat.

It was simple, yet not overly sweet, and with a light texture that never grew tiresome. Truly exquisite. All the more so because it'd been made by one of her deeply respected and loved masters.

“**Munch...**”

She quickly polished off three of them in a blink of an eye... only then noticing the siblings' gentle gazes after, snapping back to her senses.

“I-it is truly very delicious, Masachika-sa—”

“No polite speech.”

“It... *It's* really good. Thanks, uh, Chika... -kun

“Ohhh, this sure brings back memories...” Masachika remarked, his sentimental tone causing Ayano to shrink her shoulders as Yuki cheerfully leaned in to peek at her face.

“How's the tea? Is it good?”

“Yes,” Ayano almost said, stopping herself halfway. “*Yeah.* It's good.”

“Glad to hear that.”

Smiling warmly, Yuki then moved behind Ayano and grasped the back of her chair.

“Alright then, can you lift your hips and turn a li'l to the right~?” she asked. “Yep, yep. Now then, since you’ve been worn out from all your daily work, Ayano... no, m’lady Ayano-sama, we’ll give you a massage.

“Eh? That’s—”

Way too much, she was about to say, unable to as she gasped at the sight of Yuki suddenly kneeling at her feet.

“That’s—!” she protested, cut off as she hurriedly tried to get off her chair.

“Alrighty then, just relax. I’m touching your shoulders, okay?” Masachika said as she pressed down on her shoulders from behind.

Unable to forcefully shake him off, Ayano froze in place.

While that was all happening, Yuki took her leg in her hands and began to slowly massage her thigh.

A-ahhh. Please forgive me, Grandmother... for your little Ayano is doing something so outrageous to her esteemed masters... Ayano thought.

With no means of resistance left, Ayano could only repent in her heart to her grandmother for her conduct unbefitting of a servant.

“Ooooh~, our client sure is stiff down here, riiight~?” Yuki chimed.

“Really?” Masachika asked. “Her shoulders aren’t really, though...”

“Nope. Just wanted to say it.”

“The heck’s that s’posed to mean?”

Hearing their conversation from above and below, Ayano could only let out a thin, trembling voice, torn between embarrassment and guilt.

“U-um, this is... honestly already... enough...”

“Eh? No, no, the real show starts now, though?” Yuki refuted.

“T-that’s not what I meant. Doing such a thing like this is...”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Look, relaaaaax~.”

“B-but this is far too—”

“Shut up! Eat your donuts!!!” Yuki exclaimed, shouting her order.

“**Munch, munch, munch, munch, munch, munch, munch.**”

“*Fwahaha*, you’re so cute, Ayano! Your munching face’s the cutest thing! I seriously want to watch it forever!”

“Then I shall continue eating until my stomach nearly bursts!”

“The hell is up with you two...?” Masachika murmured, letting out an exasperated sigh as he moved from Ayano’s shoulders to her head.

“How is this? It’s just a scalp massage, but...” he asked, trailing off toward the end.

“*Nnh...* It feels good... It feels good... I think?”

“Haha. Oh well, it’s probably hard to tell at first, huh?”

Different from how her grandmother washed her hair, the sensation of her scalp being tugged upward in firm movements left her unsure with how she was supposed to react...

“Alrighyyy, I’ll give you a foot massage on this side, ’kaaay~? ...*Hyah!*” Yuki exclaimed, mimicking the sound of a martial artist doing a karate chop.

“.....”

“Huh? Did that not work? How ’bout this one?” she asked, moving onto Ayano’s other foot.

“.....”

“N-no way... Are you just... super healthy...!?”

Nope, it was working: Ayano was just enduring it all like usual. Pain on this level was nothing but a mere reward if it came from one of her masters.

Still, setting all that aside, the situation of being attended to by the both of them brought on a sensation deep within her stomach that could only be described as part anxiety and part fear...

“Ah...! Hngh!” Ayano gasped as she squirmed in reaction.

“How’s that? Starting to feel all good?”

“Y-yes.”

“Your polite speech’s back, Ayano.”

“Y-yeah...”

What was more, facing the pressure of not being able to use her normal polite speech only made that sensation build even more and more.

“Alright, next up’s her back,” Masachika chimed.

“Kaaaay,” Yuki agreed. “Alrighty then, m’lady. Let’s get you on the bed, okaaaay~?”

With Yuki calling her “m’lady” once again, something inside of her finally snapped.

“Eee—”

““?””

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeeek!!!”

“Woooah!?”

“What’s wrong!?”

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeeek!!! Eeeeeeeeeeeeeek!!!”

““Did Ayano break!?”” the siblings yelled in unison.

Clutching her head as she let out bizarre cries, Ayano rolled around on the floor before curling up into a small ball face-down, breathing in ragged breaths.

“...Please ride me.”

Her gaze remained fixed on the floor as she practically squeezed these words out.

“Huh?”

“Come again?”

“I beg you... Please... ride me...!”

“R-ride you...?” Masachika murmured, bewildered.

“Eh? You mean like this?”

Complying with Ayano’s request, Yuki settled onto Ayano’s back, allowing her to timidly feel the pressure of her hips.

“Ahh...!”

That weight on her back. The pain in her arms and legs. Such sensations came together to wash away all the guilt and tension that had built up throughout her entire body, dissolving them with a soft, fizzing release.

At this moment, Yuki-sama is... nothing but a servant, so I... who has become her chair, am therefore even lower... Ayano thought, using such wild logic to cope with the present situation. It is like I'm furniture. No, maybe livestock? Heh... Heheh.

“Eh? What’s up with this girl laughing like that...? That’s scary,” Yuki remarked.

“Is she... kicking down her self-respect in order to stay mentally stable...?”

“Shouldn’t we be just calling it self-deprecation at this point...? Oh weeeell, might as well just go ahead and fondle her ass since we’re here,” Yuki slyly said, taking full advantage of the situation at hand. “Ohhh~, ohhh~, now ain’t that quite a nice ass, huh?”

“Stop with the casual sexual harassment already,” Masachika grumbled, whacking his sister right in the head.

“Ow... Anyway, banning her in everyday clothes and the whole ‘no polite speech’ thing looks to be the right choice for now, right? For her mental stability, I mean.”

“You’re the one who had the bright idea to change how she spoke in the first place...”



It was now after that exchange.

With Masachika and Yuki having changed into their casual home clothes, Ayano had at long last finally returned to her usual state of mind.

The three of them now sat at the table facing one another, with Masachika having lowered his head with a serious expression.

“Well, um... we somehow kinda ended up fooling about, so... sorry, okay?” he apologized. “For putting you through all that stress.”

“Eh...? N-no, that isn’t—”

“No, hear me out.”

“.....”

Reacting to his solemn tone, and realizing that he was now talking about more than just what had gone down earlier, Ayano swallowed the words that had instinctively risen to her lips.

“I had given you a painful role to play, and ended up doing something that betrayed your devotion on top of it. I’m truly, very sorry,” Masachika admitted, apologizing with another deep bow before relaxing his expression slightly as he continued. “And also, I’m... honestly grateful that you worried so much about me to the point where you had even hurt your heart for my sake. Thank you.”

Hearing his sincere words, his honest appreciation for all that she had done behind the scenes, Ayano felt a gentle warmth spreading from deep within her chest. Her eyes unexpectedly grew hot out of nowhere, and she clenched her hands tightly beneath the table, blinking over and over as she steadied her throat.

“...Such praise is far too kind for me,” she said, taking a deep breath to suppress the swell of such immense emotion before offering her own words in order to keep her master from worrying. “And... I do not consider what you did as an act of betrayal. Certainly, I had been surprised at the time, but... I understand that it was something unavoidable as opposing candidates.”

“...Gotcha.”

With Masachika nodding in visible relief, Ayano let out a quiet breath of her own, the tension releasing from her shoulders.

“And let me thank you too, okay?” Yuki chimed in, shifting the focus to her. “You really saved us this time, Ayano... Had you not been there, Nonoa-san might’ve completely crashed the election for me and Onii-chan... We might’ve really lost the very stage to clash our conflicting motivations before we even got the chance... So, really, thank you. I’m truly happy that you’ve stayed as my partner, Ayano.”

The moment Ayano heard those words, the dam that she had been barely holding back inside finally burst all at once. Her vision was swallowed by tears, and droplets soon began to stream down her cheeks one after another.

“Th-thank you... very much... **hic**!”

Squeezing out only those words from her trembling chest, Ayano lowered her head and let her tears fall.

With the sharp scraping sounds of chairs being pulled back from right in front of her, she then felt the warmth of her beloved masters against her back and her head.

Ah...

In truth, Ayano had been anxious all along.

Though despite thinking that Nonoa was plotting something when she had faced her on that very emergency stairwell, she had still, in that moment, instinctively leapt straight into her grasp.

What was Nonoa trying to do? Would it harm her two masters? She had no certainty about it all.

Could my very actions themselves be a betrayal against my masters?

Would they be disappointed in me if I confessed that I was deceiving someone like this?

It had been doubts like these that had swirled endlessly in her mind up until this point.

But now... all of that anxiety had finally been swept away. Such a relief, combined with the reassurance that she had truly been of help to the both of them, now caused all that pent-up anxiety and fear she had been shouldering to spill out as tears.

“Thank... goodness... Oh thank goodness...” Ayano uttered, continuing to sob quietly as she felt Yuki’s arms as they gently embraced her and Masachika’s hand as it softly stroked her back.

A peaceful silence then passed for a while... As the last of her tears finally stopped and she began to calm down, an intense wave of embarrassment then suddenly washed over her entire body.

“U-um... um...”

Murmuring in a voice as faint as a mosquito’s buzz, Ayano lightly shifted her body, with her two masters letting go and returning to their own seats across from her, understanding her intent. Feeling a small trace of loneliness at that, Ayano then stood up with the scrape of her chair.

“U-um, please excuse me... I will go wash my face...!” she said, bowing hurriedly as she did before immediately dashing to the bathroom.

Taking the opportunity to fix her hair as well, she returned to the living room after gathering her composure.

“Thank you... for waiting...”

Still unable to look at the two of them out of lingering shame, Ayano returned to her seat.

“So, Ayano... What d’you wanna do?” Yuki asked gently.

“Eh...?”

“Well, I’ve been doing some self reflecting after everything that’s happened this time around, y’know...?” she confessed. “I heard you apparently told Nonoa-san that all you want is for me and Onii-chan to get along, and that got me thinking that maybe those really were your true feelings, or something... Or that you possibly didn’t want to go up against Onii-chan in the elections too, I guess~? Things like that... The more I thought about it, the more I’ve realized that I’ve never actually properly asked what *you* want, Ayano.”

Pausing to scratch her head, Yuki then gave a wry smile.

“So, I’ll ask you again, okay?” she asked again once more. “Ayano, what do *you* want to do? What do you want *us* to do?”

Looking over, Ayano saw that Masachika was waiting for her answer as well, wearing a gentle expression just like Yuki’s.

As for myself... she thought, almost confessing the desire hidden within the depths of her heart... only to swallow it at the very last moment.

A wish so stained with such a selfish desire that it was something, as a servant, must never be said.

So... instead, Ayano voiced a different wish.

“I... would like to play cards.”

“...Cards?”

“Yes, like in the old days... I would like to play cards together. The three of us.”

Turning to each other at her answer, Yuki and Masachika both gave slightly awkward smiles.

I understand that, Ayano thought.

She knew that this was not the answer her masters had truly wanted her to give.

“...Alright, as I requested, let’s play cards now, shall weeee~?” she said, intentionally speaking in an out-of-character tone with that in mind. “We decided today’s a day we do everything ol’ Ayano wants to do, riiight~?”

“That’s right, huh?” Masachika agreed. “Now, where were these cards again...?”

Despite her two masters most likely—no... without a shadow of a doubt—noticing that she had dodged the question, they still chose to go along with it as if nothing had happened.

I’m sorry... And thank you very much, she apologized in her heart to those endlessly kind masters.

“Ah, found them,” Masachika called out from his room. “These are the ones I used for practicing magic and like tricks, though...”

“Oh, well let’s use those then, yeah? There aren’t any trick cards mixed in them, right?” Yuki asked.

“There aren’t, there aren’t. Uhhh, we’ve got the three of us... so is poker fine?”

“Yes, that’s not a problem,” said Ayano.

“Alrighty, we’ll need chips, hm...? Oh well, I guess chocolate’s fine, huh?”

And so, with ten pieces of chocolate handed out to each of them as chips, Masachika began to shuffle the cards.

“So the rules are... we take turns being the dealer, and have five cards per hand. You get one draw before we start betting. Sound good?”

“Yes.”

“Hol’ on a sec,” Yuki interrupted, raising her hand with a quick flick of her wrist as she looked at both Masachika and Ayano. “Playing normally means that Ayano would be at a huge advantage from being worse at mind games than us, wouldn’t she? Shouldn’t we add one more rule here?”

“Well I guess that’s fine... What exactly?”

“Fufuuu~, I’ve actually found this interesting app the other day, ya knooow~?”

With a delighted expression that practically screamed, “So glad you asked,” Yuki fiddled with her phone before turning its screen to the other two.

“A lie detector app!” she exclaimed. “We’ll play mind games while using this!”

“...Would that even make it a mind game at that point?”

“Yeah, yeah, just try installing the app first, okay? Both of you,” Yuki said, nonchalantly dismissing Masachika’s valid point.

Following her suggestion, both Masachika and Ayano downloaded the app and got through its initial quick setup. The app itself apparently worked by placing your index finger on the screen while you spoke, with it judging whether your statement was a lie or the truth based on your pulse and voice. The more likely it was that you were lying, the more the needle swung to the right... That was how it basically worked.

“After each player finishes their draw and before we start betting, everyone gets to ask one question to anyone else, starting from the dealer and going clockwise...” Yuki explained. “Said person being asked must then answer while using the app. So? Think that sounds pretty interesting?”

“I... suppose so?” Ayano answered, despite still not grasping the special rules as she did.

No, or rather, she did understand the rules themselves.

But what sort of strategies would they lead to?

She couldn’t imagine how the game would unfold at all from it.

On the other hand, however, Masachika looked to have already read that far ahead, slowly nodding with a thoughtful expression.

“Sounds good. Let’s do it that way, yeah?”

“Okaaay. Then, we’ll do two rounds for now, six matches total, alriiiight~?”

With that, the three of them placed their phones on the table, and the game began.

The first match.

After drawing and exchanging her dealt cards, Ayano ended up with pocket rockets, and as the special rule kicked in immediately, Masachika spoke to Yuki.

“Yuki, is your hand stronger than a two pair?”

“Yeah,” Yuki answered instantly with a gentle smile, the needle on her screen swinging up to around thirty on a scale of a hundred before falling back...

Uhhh...? Was that... a lie? Or the truth? Ayano thought, struggling to keep up with the ambiguous result, just as Yuki turned toward her.

“How ’bout your hand, Ayano? Is it stronger than a two pair?” she asked.

“Eh? Ah, um...” Ayano stumbled, her head spinning as she frantically raced through her thoughts.

At the very least, she understood that an honest “No” here was almost certainly a loss.

“Yes.”

Woosh! The needle on her screen shot to the right.

“No way, you really are that transparent, huh?” Yuki remarked.

“You’re way too easy to read, Ayano...” Masachika agreed. “Even though your face’s so expressionless.”

At the mixed expressions of exasperation and fond amusement from her two masters, Ayano slightly shrank her shoulders.

“Now then, it’s your turn, Ayano. Ask away.”

“Ah, yes...”

Egged on by Yuki, she then attempted to sort out the current situation to figure what to ask.

Uhhh, Yuki-sama’s hand is most likely a two pair or better... and since Masachika had asked whether it had been, does that mean he has a two pair too? she contemplated. Did Yuki-sama also take that the same way? Was that why she asked me the same question after concluding that she could beat him? Uh, uhhh...

And yet, what all trying to organize her thoughts did was make everything in her head become a tangled mess. On top of that, the pressure of making her two masters wait threw her thinking further into more confusion...

“Y-Yuki-sama, may I ask what your hand is!?” Ayano asked in the end, an absurdly straightforward question bursting right out of her mouth.

Widening her eyes slightly in response, Yuki then shot a small smile.

“A royal flush.”

The needle on her phone swung sharply to around ninety on a scale of a hundred.

“Ah...” Ayano muttered, realizing her mistake.

Why hadn’t she just asked the same kind of question as the other two? Wouldn’t asking something so specific, like she had, be brushed off so easily with an answer that was obviously a lie?

“That’s... Oh well, it’s still the first round. Don’t sweat it, Ayano,” Masachika offered these words in an attempt to cover for her.

Still, realizing that she had completely wasted her question, Ayano could only shrink her neck in embarrassment.

“Now then, we’ll move on to betting, alright?”

However, with Masachika’s next words snapping her right out of it, she quickly shifted her thoughts into reconsidering the intent behind the two of their questions.

As I thought, the most probable scenario is... Masachika having a two pair and Yuki-sama having a hand stronger than that, is it not? she thought to herself. *If that obvious lie she had given just now was at around ninety percent, then her earlier answer to Masachika’s question was, in all likelihood, truthful.*

Either way, with just pocket rockets, her chances of winning here were extremely low.

“Okay, I’ll go first...” said Masachika. “Bet.”

“Raise,” Yuki declared almost immediately, sliding forward two more chocolates than he had.

Seeing that, Ayano turned her conjecture into certainty, placing her hand face-down on the table.

“I will fold.”

“Call,” yet Masachika proclaimed the instant after.

“!?”

His unexpected announcement made her eyes widen slightly.

Masachika-sama is accepting her challenge...!? It can’t be, could his earlier question have been a trap, and that his hand is actually stronger than a two pair? Or maybe so?

While Ayano remained in a daze, the other two revealed their hands...

Masachika, a pair of Jacks.

Yuki, an utter fish.

“...??”

With the game unfolding in a way that completely defied her expectations, Ayano blinked repeatedly in confusion. And yet, on the other hand—and for some reason—the two siblings exchanged bold, all-knowing smiles.

“Look at you... Fooled the lie detector right off the bat, haven’t ya?” Masachika taunted.

“Heh, this level of skill’s just basic for an otaku, ya know?” Yuki shot back. “Then there’s you, Onii-chan, tryna bait me with that very first question, didn’tcha?”

“.....”

The both had jumped straight into fighting a battle of the wits on a level that Ayano could never even hope to reach.

From then on, the two of them skillfully fooled the lie detector again and again, with Ayano—who reacted transparently each time—standing no chance of competing.

Aside from one lucky win when she managed to get a full house, she spent the rest of the rounds doing nothing but endlessly coughing up her chocolates, until at last they reached the question phase of the sixth and final match.

“Hmm~, let’s seeee. Alrighty, Ayano,” Yuki said, turning to Ayano when it came to her turn, with she and Masachika having already finished with their own questions.

With their gazes meeting after having been called on, Yuki gave her a gentle smile.

“Let me ask that same question again, just one more time... Ayano, what do *you* want to do?”

And with those unexpected words, Ayano’s thoughts came to a halt.

“What do *you* want us to do, Ayano?”

A question from her master, filled with nothing but absolute care.

Letting out a small gasp in reaction, Ayano sat in front of the two of them as they waited for her answer with gentle gazes.

There's nothing else I want from the two of you, she almost said on instinct... only for the lie detector in her hand to catch her attention.

But... I absolutely mustn't say it.

That was her pride as a servant; she simply couldn't make any presumptuous wishes to her masters. For someone in her position, giving instructions to her masters was something she had absolutely had no right to.

I absolutely mustn't...

But lying here wasn't allowed.

And to dodge the question again, after they had asked her once more...

I absolutely...

Having turned that determination over in her mind twice, and then a third time...

"I... would like..." Ayano began to speak, her lips moving on their own before she knew it, weaving her words together amidst a countless number of thoughts that tangled together in her mind.

"I would like... for the three of us to stay together forever."

And once those words were spoken, more began to pour out one after another.

"Like this. Forever... I want the three of us to stay close and be together. Forever, and ever...!"

Clenching her hand tightly over her phone, she lowered her face deeply and pressed her lips together.

I said it; I messed up...!

But as a burning shame rose within her, followed by a creeping sense of regret... a hand gently rested on her downturned head.

“Thank you,” came Masachika’s gentle voice. “I’m glad you said that.”

Ayano slowly lifted her face.

And there, she met the gazes of the two siblings, the look in their eyes as caring as always... no, even more caring than they had been just moments ago.

“*Mm*, thanks for being honest. I understand your feelings now,” Yuki chimed in, gently wrapping both of her hands around Ayano’s own—still clenched on top of her phone—before looking straight into her eyes. “I promise, okay? Onii-chan and I will always stay close, and you’ll always be with us too, Ayano.”

“Yeah... We’re childhood friends, no matter what happens from here on out...” Masachika said softly, only to hesitate slightly before then giving a soft, gentle smile. “No, I’ve... always thought of you as a little sister too, Ayano. We’re siblings... so we’ll always be close, and we’ll always be together.”

Their words made an immense warmth blossom from deep within her chest. Closing her eyes, Ayano basked in that sensation for a moment... before opening them once again and giving her own small smile.

“Yes.”

“*Mm*.”

“Yeah.”



The three of them then met each other's gaze, sharing their smiles for several seconds... only for Yuki to suddenly pull back and raise her voice as if to reset the mood.

“Alright! Now's the final showdown! There ain't no point in making wishy washy li'l bets to the end! Let's go! All in!” she declared, shoving all her chocolate forward with a dramatic clatter.

“Hey, hey, you're actually betting it all? What was the point in all of the matches 'til now...” Masachika retorted, giving a wry smile as he pushed all his chocolates forward as well.

In response, Ayano, too, pushed forward her chocolates—far fewer in number than the other two—in front of her, and all bets were set.

“Alright then... reveal your hands! Showdown!”

At Yuki's call, the three of them then turned over their cards...

“Wha—!? A straight flush!?” she exclaimed, dramatically clutching her head.

“Hey, hey, seriously?” Masachika added, letting out a wry laugh.

All the while, Ayano shrank her shoulders in embarrassment. Yuki, immediately breaking into a wide grin, then swept all the chocolates on the table toward her with one fell swoop and began to clap.

“Congrats, Ayano. As expected of today's star.”

“Congrats.”

“Thank you... very much...”

Receiving both their applause, Ayano smiled shyly and shrunk her shoulders even more.

“Now then,” Masachika said, clapping his hands together once as if to reset the mood. “What do we do next? Wanna play another game? Call it winner's privilege: you can choose whatever you like, y'know?”

“Uhhh, let's see, hm...?” Ayano murmured. “Then, how about The Game of Life, perhaps?”

“The Game of Life, huuuh~? Do you have it, Yuki?”

“*Ahh*, not sure ’bout that. Oh well, I’ve probably got some video game version somewhere if it comes to it.”

With the two of them heading toward Yuki’s room as they talked, Ayano, too, rose from her chair.

And yet...

“Ah, you’re good, Ayano,” Masachika called out to her. “*We’ll* look for it.”

“Mm-hmm, mm-hmm,” Yuki agreed. “Ah, actually, sorry, but could you put the cards away?”

“Ah... Certainly.”

Settling back into her chair at their words once again... Ayano let her gaze drift down to her phone, where the lie detector app was still running.

In that instant...

“You wanna go back to those days. Those days when it was just the three of you: a peaceful and happy time alone with those feelings. You never wanted some intruder barging in.”

The words that Nonoa had once said resurfaced in her mind. Talking a careful glance toward the door leading to the hallway, Ayano then placed her index finger against her phone.

“I will be fine as long as the three of us get along,” she murmured. “Even if... I am no longer the second most important to each of them...”

Finishing with her words, she then stared silently at the needle on the screen.

“Hmm~? You say somethin’, Ayanoooo~?” Yuki called out to her.

“No, it was nothing of any importance.”

Answering her call, Ayano then quietly switched her phone off.

[\[1\]](#): The official name for labor day in Japan, not to be confused with the labor day celebrated on September 7th in the US/Canada, or May 1st in other parts of the world.

Chapter 5 - Looks Like the Older-Younger Sibling Reversal Was a Misunderstanding

“Ah, Masachika-kun,” Yuki called out. “Could you look at this for a moment?”

“Hmm~?”

“This part right here...”

The student council was currently gathered, busy with their usual duties.

Seeing Masachika and Yuki continue their usual back-and-forth while in the midst of it all, even after revealing that they were brother and sister, Touya could only look on with a slightly curious gaze.

“Hmm... Siblings, huh...?” he muttered.

“Hm? What’s wrong?” Chisaki asked, prompting Touya to tilt his head.

“No... I just don’t get it, you know? Because to me, Suou honestly looks more like his older sister.”

“I’m *really* not letting that slide there, Prez. Like, you’re seriously saying I’m *this thing’s* li’l brother?” Masachika spoke, pointing his thumb sharply at Yuki’s face while making an expression as if to say, “That joke’s harsh, man.”

“That’s true,” Chisaki nodded in agreement. “Yuki-chan does seem more mature, right?”

However, she was agreeing with Touya, not him.

“Sarashina-senpai!?” Masachika protested, just as Alisa nodded as well, a mischievous smile playing at her lips.

“I mean, judging by how things are at school... it wouldn’t feel out of place to say that Yuki-san was your older sister, right?” she argued.

“You’re kiddin’ me, aren’t you? C’mon.”

“Oh my, oh my,” Yuki chimed. “Well then, Masachika-kun, feel free to call me ‘Onee-chan’ from now on, alright?”

“No way, absolutely not,” Masachika flatly refused.

His sharp glare at his little sister prompted Alisa to let out a small chuckle, before suddenly turning to Touya to ask a question, as if a thought had struck her.

“But wouldn’t Masha and I also... seem like I’m the older sister by that logic?”

“Ehhh~?” Maria pouted. “Alya-chan, that’s meeean~”

“Hmm. That’s quite the tough question...” Touya remarked.

As he hesitated, looking back and forth between the two sisters, Chisaki, on the other hand, laughed cheerfully as if it were obvious.

“No, no. Masha’s definitely the older sis between these two, isn’t she~?”

“That’s right, hm?” Masachika agreed.

“No mistake about it, right?” Yuki added with a nod.

“W-why!?”

With the two of them both nodding in agreement, Alisa stood up in an indignant huff and raised her voice in protest.

“I’m taller, and I give off more of the reliable older daughter type, don’t I!?” she argued, seeking agreement from the others as she puffed out her cheeks like a child while pointing at Maria, who whined with an “Ehhh~?” in her own sulky way.

However...

“...That’s right, hm?”

“...Right?”

“...Isn’t that riiight~?”

All Masachika, Chisaki, and Yuki respectively did was return lukewarm gazes, “agreeing” in somewhat monotone voices.

“W-why’re you all reacting like that...?” Alisa muttered, recoiling slightly in response.

I guess an older sister’s heart’s just unknown to the younger one, huh...? Masachika mused. *Well, Masha-san’s deliberately hiding hers, though...*

Thinking of Maria’s true nature—someone who was usually so soft and loose in front of her younger sister but actually quite mature—he then averted his gaze.

**Knock knock*,* then came a knock on the door, right from the direction he had just turned away from.

“Come in.”

Having invited the person on the other side in reflexively, the door opened with a clack, with a girl and her side ponytail swooshing right into the room after.

“Yo, yo! Here comes your beloved Elena-senpai.”

“Now *that’s* the kinda self-confidence I’d like to learn from,” Masachika muttered half-seriously, just as his senior strode in with a bold smile with her right hand on her hip and her left hand raised high.

“Elena-senpai! Elena-senpai!” Alisa called out to her immediately. “Me or Masha!? Which one of us do you think seems like the older sister!?”

“Nweeeh? What’s with that question all a sudden...?” Elena asked, stopping in surprise.

She looked completely taken aback, with Chisaki cheerfully laughing in response.

“Perfect timing. Alright then, Elena senpai, if the seven of us were all siblings, in what order would you think we’d be from eldest to youngest?”

“Ohhh, now that’s an interesting question, isn’t it, Sarashina-senpai?” Yuki beamed in an excited voice. “Since we’re at it, how about we make it so that anyone Elena-senpai chooses as younger has to call anyone she picks as older as ‘Onii-chan’ or ‘Onee-chan’ for the rest of today?”

“What kinda weird roleplay is that s’posed to be...?”

Masachika could only sigh in exasperation at his little sister’s strange suggestion to Chisaki’s request. However... upon hearing it, Elena grinned mischievously.

“Ho ho, that does sound interesting, hmm...? What’s your guys’ actual birthday order, by the way?” she asked.

“U-uhhh...”

It was a question that not only Yuki but most of the group hesitated over.

“If it’s the actual order, it’s Prez, Chisaki-chan, me, Kuze-kun, Alya-chan, Ayano-chan, and then Yuki-chan, amiriiite~?” Maria smoothly answered the very question in their place as the others tried to rack their memories.

“Heeeeh~? So Yuki-chan’s the youngest. What? That’s a li’l surprising.”

Nodding several times with interest, Elena let out a big grin.

“Alrighty, sounds good! I, Elena, shall go ahead and decide the age order based purely on my own judgement and bias!”

“Ah, Vice Prez’s getting all fired up...” Touya uttered

“And our opinions won’t matter, huh...?” Masachika tacked on.

While the two of them were basically already slipping into resignation, the girls each began their own mental predictions.

So Alya-chan might finally call me Onee-chan? Eeeek! I’m so exciteeed~♡, Maria thought.

I've been called Onee-sama countless times now, but this might be the first time I'll be called Onee-chan. M-maybe I'm a little interested? Chisaki admitted.

Masachika-kun calling me Onee-chan...? Alisa mused. *That... doesn't sound bad, hm?*

Heh heh heh, Yuki laughed sinisterly to herself. *Time to show off my overwhelming li'l sister powers...*

C-could this perhaps mean... I will be allowed to call Yuki-sama and Masachika-sama Onee-chan and Onii-chan!?

Driven by five completely different desires, they all went along with Yuki's proposal and turned their hopeful gazes toward Elena.

"Fufufu~," Elena chuckled as she met them, smiling in clear delight as she puffed out her chest with an exaggerated pride. "Well then, ready for me to start...?"

"Ah, gimme a moment, please, Elena-senpai. I'll make a prediction since we're at it."

Without giving it any much thought, Masachika then grabbed a nearby piece of paper and started to jot down his predicted order.

"Oho~?" Elena scoffed in response, her eyes gleaming sharply. "So the one who completely saw through ol' Elena-senpai in her Trick-or-Treat game before now believes he'll be able to this time as well? Is that whatcha saying?"

"What? No, I didn't mean that that at all—"

"You sure say bold things, hmm, Kuze-kun? Sure, that's fine, y'know? I'll take on that challenge."

"Could you please stop talking with the voices in your head already?" Masachika calmly quipped.

Completely ignoring him, Elena then pointed a finger toward his face.

"It's a bet, Kuze-kun!" she declared. "If your predicted order has fewer hits than misses, I win! If it has more, then you win! Okay!?"

“...What happens if I lose, by the way?”

“Hmm, there is that, huh...? I wonder if I should make you say, ‘My eyes were utterly blind. Sorry for getting all cocky without knowing my place,’ while you sit kneeling all proper?”

“What, I wasn’t even being cocky... No way, you’re still holding a grudge ’bout that Trick-or-Treat game?” Masachika remarked wittily, shooting Elena a lukewarm gaze as he remembered her original game.

Specifically, the game they had once played in this very student council office, and how it had ended with her exposing her own panties and declaring defeat.

“Of course, you know!?” Elena exclaimed, immediately grabbing the hem of her skirt as she glared fiercely at him. “You made your senior here do something *that* embarrassing!”

“But Elena-senpai, you were the one who insisted on doing it and ended up self-destructing though, weren’t you...?”

“Shadaaap~! I’m making you pay for humiliating me right there, right now, okay!?”

“What a small-minded person... Is your brain up there the size of a sake cup, or something?”

“It’s more like a bottle cap, no?” Yuki commented.

“Yuki-chan!? I’ve thought this for a while now, but aren’t you a little harsh on ol’ Elena-senpai now and then!?” Elena snapped, whipping around to glare at her, only to falter and fall silent as she came face to face with her ultimate archaic smile and slight tilt of her head.

Clearing her throat lightly, she then turned back to Masachika, shooting him a villainous noble-lady grin.

“To get back on track,” she started again. “If I lose, I’ll sit kneeling all proper and say, ‘I stand corrected. I spoke out of turn and sincerely apologize,’ okay? How ’bout it!?”

“How ’bout it, you say...? I’d honestly rather not, though.”

“Why not!?”

“No, like, because there’s no real benefit for me to accept it in the first place... Or rather, sit kneeling all proper and saying all *that* out loud’s basically just full-on groveling, am I right?”

“...I mean, you *could* say that, I guess?” Elena said in a prankish tone, averting her gaze upward as she stuck out her tongue playfully.

“That makes accepting it even less worth it, y’know?” Masachika said, shooting her a flat, unimpressed stare. “I don’t have a thing for groveling in front of my friends, and I certainly don’t have one for making my senior do so either.”

“Grr, mmgh... That’s it!”

“You’ve definitely just thought of something terrible there...”

Ignoring Masachika’s exasperated voice, Elena’s eyes then perked up as if she had just come up with a brilliant idea.

“Alrighyyy,” she coyed, twisting her body slightly in a strangely seductive way. “If you win, Kuze-kun... for each correct guess, you’ll let ol’ Erona-senpai [\[L\]](#) take off a piece of clothing for Y–O–U♡”

“Seee~? Completely terrible.”

“Shoes, socks, ribbon tie, blazer, skirt, shirt, underwear... You might get a li’l special reveal if you get everything correct, y’know♡? That’ll get you motivated, won’t it!?”

“It’s strange, huh? ’Bout how I’ve never felt this unexcited before...? Or rather, including your shoes as part of the stripping order feels kinda sly, or something...”

“Alright! Looks like you’re plenty motivated?”

“Do we have a doctor in the audieeence~? One specializing in ears or brains?” Masachika asked, cupping his hands together like a megaphone as he called out to the rest of the room.

“Wait, Vice Pre—no... Elena-senpai,” Touya interrupted, his hand on his forehead as if he had a headache. “I *really* can’t overlook you playing some stripping game in the student council office, you know?”

“Same here,” Chisaki agreed. “I absolutely cannot allow such a punishment game as the Vice President *and* head of the disciplinary committee.”

“Eeeh!?”

Turning sharply at the cold rejection from the current President and Vice President, Elena could only clench her teeth upon seeing the latter’s firm stance.

“Got it... Then no stripping. Sorry, Kuze-kun.”

“No, could you stop phrasing it as if *I* was the one asking for it?”

“You don’t have to admit it out loud, you know...? Because you were dying to see this sexy body of ol’ Erona-senpai deep down, amirite?”

“I’d rather see the insides of a turtle’s shell,” Masachika snapped, his mouth twitching at its corner as Elena gracefully ignored his constant deadpan jabs, nodding with a gentle, all-knowing look as if she was saying, “I get you, I get you.”

“Alrighty, no stripping then,” she conceded. “You’ll just guess who goes where for when I line this group up from eldest to youngest.”

“No, about that rule... Elena-senpai, aren’t you at a massive advantage since you get to freely decide the order? Say, for example, there’s no way anyone could guess if you decided to put Prez as the youngest here.”

“Well I’d like for you to just trust me on that, okaaay~? I won’t change the order I choose just to prioritize winning against you, Kuze-kun.”

“.....”

Staring intently into Elena’s eyes as if searching for the truth, Masachika then let out a small sigh.

“Yeah, alright,” he said. “I’ll take that bet.”

“As expected of you, Kuze-kun. You’ve got a great spirit♪”

“Yeah, yeah.”

So we ended up making this a bet after all, huh? Masachika mused, growing tired of all the hassle as he moved over to the sofa where Elena couldn't see him.

After writing his prediction on his piece of paper, he folded it twice and returned to his seat.

“Now then, let's move straight to it, okay!” Elena announced, raising her voice as if to reset the mood. “First up: the eldest iiiis...”

Pausing for dramatic effect, she then looked around the seven student council members.

“*Dururururururu, d-du, duru, dururu,*” she sang, attempting to mimic the sound of a drumroll quite poorly.

“Are you just terrible at drumrolls or what?” Masachika jested.

“Shut up; I'll make you the youngest, y'know?”

“That's probably a threat humanity's never heard before.”

“*Dararararararararara—*”

After smoothly fixing the sound she was trying to emulate, stretching the moment to create more suspense, Elena swept her gaze around before shooting a finger forward.

Or rather, her thumb. At herself.

“The eldest daughter! Me!!!”

“Hold it there!” Masachika exclaimed, actually standing up this time to protest. “Between cheating back in that Trick-or-Treat game and now this... You really just do whatever you want, huh!?”

“Eh? But I said ‘for when I line *this group* up from eldest to youngest,’ didn't I?” Elena refuted. “I never said it had to only be *current* student council members, no?”

And as she once again averted her gaze upward with her tongue stuck out, Elena was met with cold stares not only from Masachika but from the other student council members as well. Seemingly feeling that awkward pressure herself, she then quickly stepped back and attempted to move on.

“Alright, next up’s number two...”

“No, you’re not getting away with that—”

“Second daughter! Maria-chan!” Elena announced, ignoring Masachika’s attempt to press the issue.

“Yaaay! I’m the older sisteeer~♪” Maria beamed, happily jumping to her feet.

“Eeeh!?” Alisa protested, standing up as well. “Why’s that!?”

“No, isn’t it strange that li’l sis Kujou’s the first to react like that...?” Touya muttered.

And just as Alisa was about to object even further to Elena’s judgement, Maria suddenly grabbed both of her shoulders and pulled her closer.

“C’mon, Alya-chan! Call me Onee-chan, okay?”

“Ugh...” Alisa groaned, frowning in clear discomfort as she faced her older sister’s sparkling eyes and excited ragged breaths head-on.

But still, having already gone along with Yuki’s earlier proposal, her pride seemingly wouldn’t let her back out now.

So, after several seconds of agonized hesitation, she ground her teeth and...

“...O.”

“O?”

“...Onee... -chan,” she Alisa finally said in an extremely low tone, her lips twisted as she turned her face away with a “nooo thanks” sort of reluctant demeanor.

“Mm. Mm!” Maria gleamed, her eyes widening in excitement. “That’s riiight! I *am* your Onee-chan, Alya-chaaan!”

Beaming with utter delight, she then squeezed Alisa tightly in a hug.

“Yeah, that reaction there’s like a little sister with amnesia only just remembering her family again,” Masachika chimed in with a wry smile from his seat.

“*Ahaha*, I get that,” Chisaki nodded in reaction, giving a mild laugh.

Seeing the contrasting expressions of the two sisters—one happily rubbing their cheeks against the other, the other looking utterly drained as she did—Elena and Touya gave ambiguous smiles as well.

Eventually, seemingly satisfied, Maria let go of Alisa with a somewhat glossy, radiant grin, trotting over to Masachika’s side.”

“Hey, hey, Kuze-kun,” she chirped.

“Ah, yes?”

“Try calling me Onee-chan too, okay?”

“Ugh...” he groaned, his smile stiffening at such a humiliating request.

Still, under Maria’s expectant gaze, it wasn’t as if he had a choice...

“Masha... -oneechan...”

“*Nfufufufu*~♡”

Swaying on the spot with an overwhelming sense of giddiness, Maria ruffled Masachika’s hair several times before then walking around the long desk.

“Ayano-chan!” she then called out next. “Try calling me Onee-chan too, okay?”

“...O-onee-chan?”

“Eeeeeee~♪!” she squealed, trembling as if savoring the moment as she hugged Ayano tightly from the side, before turning her gaze toward Yuki, who sat beyond her. “Yuki-chan! You too!”

“Yes, what is it, Masha-oneechan?” she casually and smoothly answered, lightly putting one finger to her chin as she tilted her head.

“Eeeeeek~♡!”

It was an action that melted Maria’s face into a blissful smile. Releasing Ayano, she then, for some reason, passed right by Yuki and leapt into Elena’s arms instead.

Huh? Not me? Yuki even thought to herself, unable to help it as she dropped her refined ladylike smile for an authentic reaction.

She had clearly been expecting a hug from Maria-oneesan, with Masachika shooting her an icy stare for that reaction.

“Eeeh!? Me!?” Elena meanwhile exclaimed in surprise, being the one who received the unexpected hug.

Freezing with her arms raised completely up, Maria clung to her from the front, their ample breasts between the two of them pressed together in an awkwardly cramped squeeze.

“.....”

“Hmm, this ain’t bad either,” is not the key takeaway here, *y’know?* Masachika conveyed to his younger sister, shooting an even icier glare toward her than before as she stared so intently at the overwhelming breast-to-breast sumo wrestle.

Sensing that gaze, Yuki turned and met Masachika’s eyes.

“But it’s lewd, wouldn’t you say?” she conveyed through her look.

“You’ve got a point.”

Communicating only through their eyes, the siblings shot serious nods toward each other, only for Alisa—who somehow seemed to grasp what they were thinking—to send her own icy glare flying straight at them.

At that point, Maria finally let go of Elena, who still looked visibly flustered.

“N-now then!” she spoke in a slightly high-pitched voice. “Alright, let’s reset and move on to number three, okay! The third eldest iiiis...”

Pausing with an exaggeratedly dramatic expression, she slowly scanned the others gathered at the long desk... and then pointed a finger out sharply.

“Third daughter! Yuki-chan!”

“Seriously!?” Masachika yelled out immediately.

“Wha—!?” Touya widened his eyes in shock.

“Eh...? Does that mean you think I’m younger than Yuki-chan!?” Chisaki followed suit.

Alisa, too, twitched at her cheek, already sensing that things were about to get even more chaotic at this early upset.

All the while, Yuki lowered her eyebrows slightly and smiled apologetically.

“Oh my, so I’m the third daughter, huh?” she mused. “My apologies, Prez, Sarashina-senpai.”

“No, that’s...”

“Not something you should apologize for, Yuki-chan...” Chisaki said, finishing Touya’s words, the both of them speaking with a lingering sense of dissatisfaction.

“Could you call me Onee-chan then?” Yuki asked, simply smiling sweetly in response.

“Wha—”

“Uehhh...”

“Call me Onee-chan, *please*,” she repeated her request to her two seniors, maintaining her firm and flawless smile.

Under such a quiet pressure, Chisaki twisted her mouth as if to endure the embarrassment, then averted her gaze.

“Yu... Yuki... -oneechan,” she murmured, forcing these words out.

“Yes, what is it, Chisaki-*chan*?”

“Gah...”

“She was about to say ‘just kill me already,’ wasn’t she?” Masachika muttered to himself, watching on as Chisaki reacted like a female knight being cornered by an orc.

Touya, too, pursed his lips into a thin line and looked away.

“Yuki-onee... neechan,” he mumbled.

“Yes, Touya-kun.”

“Gah...”

“It’s more humiliating than they expected, huh...?” Masachika muttered as if it were someone else’s problem, seeing his two upperclassmen with faces as if they had just taken a bitter pill...

But, yeah, there was just no way it would stay as just someone else’s problem.

“Masachika-kun,” Yuki turned to him.

“.....”

“Ma, sa, chi, ka, -kun?”

“...What is it, Onee-chan?”

“Let’s say that while looking into my eyes, shall we?”

“Gah...”

Grinding at the back of his teeth, Masachika slowly turned around to face his younger sister, who sat across the table with eyes brimming with delight.

His little sister by blood. Someone whom he had countless memories with. Memories that now flashed through his mind like a revolving lantern...

“Yuki... -oneechan,” he muttered.

“Yes, well done.”

“*Grgh*, gah...!” he groaned with a demonic-like expression, narrowing his eyes and grinding his teeth so hard that they felt like they could crack at any moment, causing Elena—who was the only one present that didn’t know about the full context of their relationship—to recoil slightly.

Deciding it was best not to drag it out any longer, she quickly moved on.

“Now then!” she declared. “Next is... the fourth daughter! Chisaki-chan!”

“Oh, me? Yipee!”

“Ugh... So I’m the youngest amongst the second-years, huh...?” Touya muttered with a troubled expression, his pride seemingly struck as the student council president.

Right at that moment, Chisaki then tapped his arm with her finger, gazing at him with an expression that looked like a mix of embarrassment and anticipation. Realizing what that gaze was asking for, Touya made several conflicted expressions before finally speaking.

“Chisaki... -oneechan,” he called out to her with a shy smile.

“Ah... yeah, Touya... -kun?” Chisaki responded, returning an equally shy one as well.

A sweeeeet, sugary atmosphere then began to envelop the both of them.

“They’ve really gone and started their own li’l world in this sorta weird roleplay...? Seriously?” Masachika jested, sighing in disbelief.

Still, the two of them couldn’t hear him anymore. They were simply in a different world, after all.

“U-uhhhh, Touya-kun... Do you want me to give you a lap pillow or something?”

“Huh!? No, that’s, well...”

“*Ufufu*, you want Onee-chan to give you a pillow, huh?” Chisaki teased, peering at him with a mischievous expression.

“Y-yeah,” Touya admitted, averting his gaze while nodding.

“Whoa, this is kinda hard to watch,” Masachika commented.

“Yeah, it’s pretty hard to look at even as a senior...” Elena sympathized.

The flirty—no, fliiirtier than flirty—atmosphere between the strangely acting Chisaki and the genuinely flustered Touya made both of them grimace in discomfort. Alisa also turned away with a similar expression, with Ayano averting her gaze entirely as well.

“Haaah...” Elena sighed. “Oh well, for what it’s worth, I was planning to announce the next one to be the eldest son, Touya, but... now’s probably not the moment for that anymore, right?”

Smoothly getting back on track, she then lightly cleared her throat, pretending to not notice the two lovebirds heading toward the sofa.

“Now then!” she spoke, returning her voice to its usual upbeat tone as though nothing had happened. “With all the second-years revealed, we’re onto the sixth oldest! The sixth child iiiis...”

As Elena once again dragged on the suspense, Alisa, sitting next to Masachika, tensed her body as she waited for the answer.

Because for her, this was the decisive moment.

Masha getting called first still doesn’t make sense to me... but oh well. It can’t be helped if I can’t beat the second-years, she thought. Then there’s Yuki-san too... Knowing her true nature sure makes it complicated, but I suppose that can’t be helped either. Still, I’ve definitely got a good chance here!

At the very least, she had the confidence that she was the most reliable amongst the remaining first-years.

Well, I mean Ayano-san is also quite... quite reliable? Mm, she does her duties properly, but has a rather unique aura... She's also small and not very assertive either, so she doesn't really give off big sister vibes. Masachika-kun is dependable in some ways too, of course, but... isn't it Elena-senpai who's putting us in order, after all? Plus, I'm clearly the one who feels like the eldest based on how I usually act, right!?

With that kind of confidence in her chest, Alisa anticipated Elena's answer.

And with her lips slowly parting in her line of sight...

"Second son! Kuze-kun!"

"Oh, it's me, huh?" Masachika spoke. "And here I was starting to think that I might actually end up being the youngest... but I guess you evaluated things properly after all, hm?"

"*Fufu*, I told you, didn't I? About how I wouldn't change the order just to prioritize winning our bet," Elena reminded him.

"That sure would've sounded more convincing if you hadn't made yourself the eldest daughter at the very start though, riiight~?"

"Ahhh~, I can't hear a thing my li'l brother's sayin', y'see~? I'm the eldest daughter, after allll~"

"Maybe it'd be better to not call you the eldest daughter but a tyrant instead~?"

Sitting beside Masachika, who was effortlessly trading comedic banter with Elena—the both of them completely in sync—Alisa, on the other hand, pursed her lips together in frustration. Then, taking a deep breath as if to feign some composure, she addressed Elena.

"Um, Elena-senpai... why is Masachika-kun the older sibling instead of me?" she asked, her steady gaze dead set on Elena.

"*I'm the one who's more calm and composed, right?*" it clearly conveyed.

"Eh? Hmm~..."

However, whether Elena noticed it or not, all she did was simply place a hand on her chin, settling into a deep thought.

“I somehow... got the sort of impression that you’re the always-reliable little sister, while he’s the older brother who—despite everything ’bout him—is someone you can count on when it really matters...” she answered. “So I figured that Kuze-kun goes above you.”

“!”

Her reasoning was far sharper than Alisa had expected. All she could do in response was gasp and fall silent, unable to immediately argue back.

Then, without missing a beat, a voice laced with amusement came from beside her.

“Hello, hello, *Alya-kun*?” Masachika teased.

“...What?” Alisa said, staring at him with a dead gaze.

“Hey, hey. You really okay with looking at ol’ Onii-chan like that?”

“Who are you calling my—!”

“Hmm?” Masachika hummed, interrupting her as he leaned in front the side, peering right at her face with an infuriating grin.

“Grgh!” Alisa grunted, grinding her teeth in humiliation...

“Ma, sa, chi, ka... -o...”

“Hm?”

“Masachika... -o... niichan...”

“Say that while facing this way, will yaaaa~?”

“Gah!” Alisa audibly gasped. “Masachika-oniichan!”

“O-oh...”

The full brunt of her sharp glare, her cheeks flushed red with embarrassment with her sudden outcry of calling him “Onii-chan,” sent a shock through Masachika so strong that it even surprised him, making him tumble into a fluster.

Seeing his reaction, Alisa's expression flipped to one of utter delight as she leaned forward to peer up at his face from below.

"Oh my, what's the matter, Masachika-oniichan?" she teased.

"Whoa," Masachika exhaled. No, it's just..."

"Oh my, oh my, your eyes sure are darting around, you know?
O-ni-i-chan♪"

"!"

With the very words slowly spilling from her cherry-colored lips once again, a ticklish sensation spread deep within Masachika's chest...

"Whoa!?"

Only for something heavy to plop right onto his back, forcing him into a hunched posture. Turning around, he saw that Yuki had partially leaned onto him, practically sitting on his back.

"...What d'you want?" he asked.

"Oh my, oh my, Masachika-kun. It should be 'What is it, Onee-sama,' shouldn't iiit?"

"...What is it, Onee-sama?"

"Oh, nothing that important. I was just simply thinking that keeping one's li'l brother wrapped around one's finger is also part of an older sister's duty, maybe?"

"You sure have got a rather warped view of sibling relationships, isn't that riiight, Onee-sama?" Masachika asked while glancing back over his shoulder.

"Eh? So older sisters are s'posed to sit on top of their little brothers?" then came someone else's unexpected voice, reacting to Yuki's words. "Alrighty, I'll do it too~♪"

"Huh?"

"Excuse meeee~"

"Wai—"

With Masachika turning back toward the front at the sound of the girl's voice, a fluff of soft brown hair fluttered right in front of his eyes, and in the next instant, a huge butt dropped right onto his thighs.

Thud!

...No, the girl didn't really sit down *that* forcefully in reality. It was just that the sheer mass was, well—and there's no way getting around this—overwhelming.

Compared to Yuki's but perched on his back, this was, in more ways than one, on a completely different level.

Whoa, it's huge!?

An overwhelming fleshy sense and weight pressed down on his thighs. Packed tightly, yet so soft, it squished against his legs and clung to them, its mass even spilling out to the sides. It was a completely different sensation from a man's, an unfamiliar touch that made Masachika understand that her body was built to bear children.

Th-this ain't good...!

Struck head-on by a sensation that hit him right at his male instincts, Masachika was thrown into a state of crisis.

“Hey! What are you doing!? That's indecent!” Alisa exclaimed in the very next moment, yanking her sister by the arm.

“Aaaaah,” Maria playfully screamed as she tumbled forward off his lap, landing on her knees.

“Wh-what on Earth were you thinking!? Sitting on a boy's lap like that!?”

“Ehhh~? ...But she said that it's an older sister's dutyyy~” she protested.

“That's obviously not true, isn't it!? A-are you an idiot!?”

“*Hmph*, don't get so angryyy~, Alya-chan.”

“Ah, hey... Don't hug me, Ma—”

“Onee-chan, riiight?”

“O-onee-chan...”

“Nnnngh~♡, Alya-chan♡,” Maria squirmed, leaning forward slightly to wrap her arms around Alisa’s neck as she rubbed her cheeks against hers.

“*Argh*, geez! You’re so clingy...!”

Naturally, her large butt, wrapped in her skirt—the very same one that had settled on Masachika’s legs just moments ago—was now thrust out behind her, landing directly on Masachika’s line of sight.

“.....”

“Masachika-kun? Is it just my imagination that it somehow feels easier to sit on you than before?” Yuki asked, feeling as if he had bent forward a little.

“Probably your imagination,” he answered to the small, still childlike butt perched on his back.

Then, at that moment, Maria suddenly glanced back over her shoulder... and from an angle that no one else could see, she stuck her tongue out slightly and gave him a wink, causing Masachika to gasp.

N-no way, her airheadedness was a calculated act!? Is Masha-san actually a little devil!?

Realizing that what appeared to be nothing but her natural airheadedness was actually a calculated display and an understanding of her own charm, Masachika shuddered inwardly.

“Uhhh,” Elena uttered, her light cough reaching his ears. “Things have gotten pretty chaotic, but... is it okay if I go ahead and make the final reveal?”

“Ah, yes. Go ahead,” Masachika answered absentmindedly, with Ayano sitting silently as she looked at her with a blank expression, and Alisa—still being hugged by Maria—looking at her with tired eyes.

Receiving the gazes of the final two remaining candidates, Elena then took a deep breath and began to speak.

“So, the two we’ve got left are Alisa-chan and Ayano-chan,” she steered the room back on track. “Our honorable youngest child of the student council iiiis~...”

After dragging the suspense out again for several more seconds, Elena swiftly pointed her finger.

“Sixth daughter! Ayano-chan! With the fifth daughter above her, Alisa-chan!”

“...*Mm*, well... sure?” Alisa muttered, still tilting her head in puzzlement at ultimately being second from bottom despite being satisfied that she ranked above Ayano.

Meanwhile, Ayano bowed silently to Elena before then shifting her gaze to the pair of siblings across from her. Specifically, the one with one of them sitting on the other, and the other being sat upon.

“Um, Masachika-sama, Yuki-sama...” she spoke up.

“Yeah?” the former answered.

“Hm?” the latter replied.

With both her masters looking at her at the same time, Ayano let her gaze wander off hesitantly... before then settling back to look up at them slightly.

“Chika... -oniichan. Yuki... onee-chan.”

And the moment she uttered these words, a thunderbolt struck through the hearts of the siblings with a BANG!

Without a word, the brother and sister duo stood up, circled around the table, and then tightly embraced Ayano from both her sides. Gently embraced by her two masters, Ayano could only shrink back bashfully, yet her cheeks loosened ever so slightly in a quiet happiness.

Alisa being hugged by her older sister, Masachika and Yuki hugging Ayano, and the couple on the sofa engaged in their sibling roleplay. Oh, and Elena, left completely behind.

“Wh-what even is this situation...?” Elena questioned, trembling at the utter chaos that had completely taken over the student council office. “U-uuuum, I’m... technically the oldest sister here though, you knooow~?” she then timidly called out, her tone of voice practically asking, “I wonder if you all even remember me?”

And yet, everyone was too absorbed in their own affection to notice her.

Then, suddenly looking like she remembered something, Elena turned toward Masachika.

“Oh right, Kuze-kun!” she exclaimed. “Our bet, our bet!”

“What...?” Masachika, who had been patting Ayano on the head, responded with a distracted voice before then looking down at the piece of paper still left sitting in front of his chair. “Oh.”

“Now then, time for payback for the Trick-or-Treat game, okay! Let’s wonder: how many of my rankings did you manage to guess, Kuze-kuuun~?” Elena snorted smugly, smiling with complete confidence in her victory as she looked at him.

Shooting her a detached glance in response, Masachika then reached over the table and picked up the piece of paper, unfolding it.

“Yeah, well, how should I put this, huh?” he mused, thrusting out its contents toward Elena.

“It was actually pretty easy to guess, I’d say.”

“...Eh?”

Written on the paper were... from bottom to top, eight names: Elena, Maria, Chisaki, Chisaki, Touya, Masachika, Alisa, Masachika.

“Wh-wha, wha...!?” Elena stammered in shock.

“This means I win, am I right?”

“Wh-what even is this!? You wrote two names twice, c’mon!”

“But that’s not against the rules, am I right? You never said it wasn’t allowed,” Masachika argued.

“Th-that’s... true, but...! There’s no cuteness in the way you tried to guess!”

“I wasn’t exactly looking for a cute way to win here.”

“Tha—... wha... *Ggh...*”

Leaving Elena, who so clearly wanted to say something but couldn’t quite get her words out, Masachika placed the piece of paper on the table for the Kujou sisters and Yuki, who were looking over at him with curious “What is it, what is it?” expressions.

“This is...”

“Wooooow, impressiiive~,” Maria chimed in admiration. “You even got Elena-senpai being at the very tooop~”

“Yeah, I mean, I figured that she’d probably be the type to slyly include herself in the rankings, so...”

“By the way, what was your reasoning behind this order?”

“Hmm, well, excluding Elena-senpai, I figured that Masha-san would probably be at the top,” Masachika started. “Then, we have Prez and Sarashina-senpai feeling like the big sis-younger guy type of couple, so I put Sarashina-senpai above. Still, the tricky part was workin’ out where Yuki would go, y’know...? I figured she’d land somewhere between second and fourth, but decided it’d be fine as long as I get just one more placement right, so I intentionally left her out. And then, for the bottom three, I figured it’d most logically be me, Alya, then Ayano, but I also did think that since it’s Elena-senpai we’re talking about here, she’d probably have me at the very bottom... So, it makes sense to go along with the ‘it’ll be good enough as long as one of them is a hit’ mindset again here, right?”

“...That is impressive, hm?” Alisa nodded in admiration. “That’s pretty much mostly right, isn’t it?”

“You’re reeeally impressive, Kuze-kuuun~” Maria agreed, clapping with a bright smile.

It was only Yuki who noticed a small crease in the paper that fell exactly between Elena's and Maria's name, which would have allowed Masachika to make a mountain fold at where it was, effectively folding out Elena's name and making his predictions appear as if there were only seven people starting from Maria...

Still, she deliberately chose not to point it out.

"Now then, Elena-senpai..." Masachika perked, turning back to Elena. "Safe to say it's my win, am I right?"

"Ugh... ngh... g-gah..." she groaned bitterly in response, glaring at him for a few seconds before finally nodding wearily in resignation. "...Alright, okay? It can't be helped if you've read all of it *this* well... I'll admit defeat, 'kay?"

"Alright then, now go ahead and make your loser's declaration, pleeease~"

"Ggh...!"

With a deeply frustrated expression, Elena dropped to her knees on the carpet...

"I stand corrected...! I spoke out of turn and sincerely apologize...!"

"That was fast," Masachika quipped in surprise, seeing Elena bowing her head sharply, delivering her loser's declaration at such a high speed, before lifting her head again all under barely three seconds.

"Aren't you getting a little *too* used to grovelling like that...?" Alisa added, stumbling slightly in surprise alongside him.

However, as Elena stood up with an exaggerated "*Phew*," wiping her forehead with her arm to feign the sense that she had actually accomplished something productive, Yuki spoke up from the side.

"Hold on a second, please," she said. "Is that really all, Elena-senpai?"

"Eh?"

Blinking repeatedly as she turned around, Elena faced Yuki's refined ladylike smile.

"You used an underhanded tactic and *still* lost, you know, Elena-senpai?" Yuki continued, pointing that out in a clear crystal clear tone. "In that case, as you had declared yourself, isn't it only right that you take off your clothes?"

"Huh...? Eh? Eeeeh!?"

Taking a few moments to process her words, Elena then hurriedly crossed both her arms to cover her body in a panic. And yet, even as Masachika and Alisa shot their own stunned looks toward Yuki alongside her, all Yuki did herself was calmly maintain her archaic smile.

"Since Masachika-kun got six people correct, that should be your shoes, ribbon tie, blazer, skirt, and shirt..." she stated, counting them off on her fingers without a shred of mercy. "But that's good for you, right? Looks like you've just barely kept your underwear on, hm?"

"Wha—? Eh...? N-no, but, still..." Elena stammered with a half-smile.

"*You're not actually serious, right?*" her eyes silently pleaded.

And yet, Yuki just gently continued, as though she was patiently lecturing her.

"Listen to me, okay, Elena-senpai?" she spoke. "Please think about this calmly and objectively. What you did here was use tactics so underhanded that everyone was put off by them, all to try and force a junior two years below you to grovel and beg, isn't that correct?"

With these words, Yuki then swiftly dropped her ladylike smile, before continuing in a completely dead-serious tone.

"To put it bluntly, that's *really* messed up."

"A look of a hundred percent pure contempt!?" Elena exclaimed, recoiling from her vengeful stare. "Uuuuuuu~," she whined, clutching her head as she tried to escape her gaze while turning toward the junior who had so vehemently rejected the idea of a stripping game earlier with a plea for help. "...Ch-Chisaki-chan!"

However...

“H-hey, Touyaaa...” Chisaki coyed. “Have you ever wanted to try wrestling around or something?”

“Hmm? W-why?”

“Weeeell... I’ve kinda heard that older sisters sometimes use pro-wrestling moves on their little brothers.”

“Th-that... certainly is something I’ve heard of before, maybe?”

“Right!? So, um... want to try it?”

“I mean, but... it’s pro-wrestling... That would mean, you know, our bodies would end up pressed against each other...”

“...Don’t wanna?”

“Oh, uh, n-no! Bring it on!”

“G-got it! Well then... here we go, okay? This one’s the... Argentine Backbreaker♡”

“Whoa, *oof, gah*... A-as expected of you, Chisaki...!”

“Hey nooooow♡, it’s Onee-chan, ain’t it?”

“Chi-chisaki, Onee... *gah!*”

Flirt, flirt, flirt, flirt...

Watching the two of them as they formed their own special world that no one could possibly intrude upon, Elena swallowed her words right back down. Then, slowly turning her gaze away as if pretending she hadn’t seen any of it... she looked toward the Kujou sisters for help.

And yet...

“.....”

Perhaps because Masachika was one who had been under the very serious risk of being forced to grovel, Alisa simply met Elena’s gaze with an icy look. Maria, too, tilted her head with a slightly troubled expression... before turning it toward Yuki.

“Um, you know what, Yuki-chan?” she spoke up. “It’s true that Elena-senpai’s cheating was pretty awful, and I do also think that it’s entirely all her own, but... I think making her end up in just her underwear feels a little too pitiful, don’t you think?”

The fact that even the kindhearted Maria couldn’t defend what she had done at all made the reality all the more serious.

“Ugh... Th-this sorta sympathy... stings in its own way...!” Elena groaned, clutching her chest as if she had taken a hit from the blow of being directly pitied by a junior of hers.

“It is, right?” Alisa agreed, following Maria’s reasoning. “Sure, she did ask for it herself, but still... being in nothing but her underwear in front of the opposite sex feels a bit too pitiful, I think.”

“*Urgh...*” Elena moaned in pain once more.

“That’s right,” Masachika spoke up next. “Besides, I have absolutely zero interest in seeing Elena-senpai in her underwear or anything like that.”

“*Guhah!*”

As Elena took yet another heavy blow, Yuki placed her index finger to her chin and hummed in thought.

“Well then, let’s see...” she mused. “What if we have Masachika-kun blindfolded and then get her to take her clothes off? What do you think about that? The embarrassment should be less if no members of the opposite sex are watching her, wouldn’t it~?”

“Eh, but Touya’s still...”

“I don’t think Prez is in any state to notice that right now if we’re talking about him...”

Following Yuki’s gaze, the others looked on as the student council president and vice president couple continued their (life-threatening) happy wrestling.

“Oh, feel this one, okay? This is... the famous Cobra Twist,” the latter chimed in delight.

“Oof!?! H-haha...! Amazing!” the former spoke in agony. “You sure know your stuff, huh, Chisaki-oneechan!?”

“Eeeeh? I don’t really know *that* much... Now, we’ll move onto the Octopus hold from here♡”

“Gagh! Th-that sure is bold, huh!?”

Entwined by his girlfriend (physically), Touya laughed happily as his eyes rolled backward. Seeing his face like that, Elena decided—yet again for the third time—to pretend as if she hadn’t seen a thing.

“Very well! I am a woman of my words!” she declared firmly with crossed arms. “I’ll take proper responsibility for what I said as your senior, okay!?”

“Ufufu, now that’s our former student council vice president for ya,” Yuki smiled in satisfaction. “Well then, Ayano. Please blindfold Masachika-kun.”

“Huuuh?” Masachika uttered, raising one eyebrow. “You’re actually seriously gonna strip...? Who even benefits from this...? Or rather, should I just step outside?”

“No! Stay right there, Kuze-kun!” a voice then shouted, coming from none other than Elena herself to stop him, just as he slightly lifted his lips to stand.

“What sorta pride is that...? Or rather, what kinda fetish is this...?” he grumbled.

“Masachi—no, Chika... -onii-chan,” Ayano then spoke hesitantly, fidgeting slightly as she did. “Um, your eyes...”

“O-oh.”

Though she was completely expressionless, the atmosphere she carried somehow exuded an endearingly timid air, making Masachika nod reflexively. Moving behind him, Ayano then lightly reached forward to cover both his eyes with her hands.

Th-this somehow feels like... those “Guess who~?” type of scenes you see in manga... Masachika contemplated as he felt the soft sensation of Ayano’s hands around his eyes.

The darkness shrouding his vision sent a strange blend of nervousness and excitement coursing through his body. Then, as if she had come full circle, seemingly resigning herself to the situation, Elena's voice—sounding as though it had regained some of its composure—reached his ears.

“Well theeen~” she chimed. “I guess maybe ol’ Erona-senpai *will* show the greedy li’l Yuki-chan her naughty underwear♡”

“Naughty underwear, you say? I look forward to seeing how it is then.”

“O-oh... I see,” Elena stuttered, unexpected Yuki’s straightforward reply. “Alrighty then... I’ll start, ’kay?♡”

A brief silence drifted by after those words.

And then, the faint rustling of clothes—something Masachika could distinctively hear, perhaps because his vision had been blocked—and nothing else.

...Wh-what’s with this fetish-like situation?

With only the sound of rustling fabric vibrating his eardrums in the darkness, a tingling sense of restlessness began to arise from deep within Masachika’s core. Feeling that vague and dangerous unease, and his reluctance to focus too much on his senior stripping right in front of him, he forcefully displaced his thoughts toward the age ranking of the student council that Elena had listed out earlier.

Hmm, now that I think about it... she really was able to grasp the mature sides to Masha-san and Yuki, and more or less somehow grasped the dynamic between mine and Alya’s relationship too, Masachika contemplated, chewing over it all. Her eye for people’s actually pretty solid, isn’t it...? It’s impressive, but I guess it’s what you’d expect from her, huh?

As he felt a small amount of respect for his senior, who, despite seemingly living by the moment and by instinct, was able to firmly grasp the essence of things, Elena’s voice reached him from beyond the darkness once again.

“Alrighty... I’m taking off my skirt now, okay?” she announced in a teasing tone, having finally reached the stage at which her underwear would be visible.

“Whoooo~!” Yuki cheered, giving a small round of applause.

Following a cheerful “Whooo~!” from Elena herself, accompanied by an “Oh myyy~” from Yuki, Masachika tensed slightly despite not being able to see a thing.

Elena had apparently now finally taken off her skirt.

Then, once again, a moment of silence.

...What’s with this weird silence? Or rather, there’s been a whole lotta pauses and clothes-rustling this whole time, right? Masachika wondered, with the answer coming from Yuki’s voice a few moments later.

“Um, Elena-senpai,” she called out.

“Hm?”

“You folding the clothes you take off extremely neatly every time since earlier... is honestly killing the whole mood.”

“Eh? But I can’t just leave them all over the place...” Elena rebutted.

“That serious side of hers is showing...” Alisa commented.

“Elena-senpai sure must’ve been raised well, riiight~?” Maria added.

“Wh-wha!? Ain’t this normal...!?”

Following the Kujou sisters’ comments, Masachika slumped slightly in his chair, realizing the truth behind all those moments of silence. Then, feeling a small jolt of surprise from Ayano through the hands covering his eyes, fully unexpected him to sink down, he raised his hand slightly in apology.

Hm?

The grip that Ayano had in her hands had loosened and shifted slightly, likely because of the fact that he had just slumped down in his seat. Or maybe it was also because she had intentionally kept her touch gentle, careful not to press down too hard on his eyelids.

Wait, Ayano! I can see! I can see! Masachika screamed inwardly.

A small gap had now somehow opened between Ayano's fingers, letting him see ahead.

And although it was too narrow to see anything below Elena's waist, Masachika could still catch clear glimpses of her in her white shirt, sending him into a full state of panic.

Still, it wasn't like he could raise his voice to warn Ayano in this situation either, so...

"Alright then, here I go..." then came Elena's voice. "I'm finally taking off my shirt now, okay♡?"

"Been waiting for thiiiis~" Yuki grinned.

Hesitating as the overly enthusiastic Elena reached for the buttons of her shirt, Masachika reflexively shut his eyes tight. With his heartbeat now pounding hard in his ears, he held his breath and erased his presence...

"Tadaaa~!"

"Whooooa... amazing. It really is lewd..." Yuki chimed in astonishment.

"E-eeeh? Do you usually wear underwear like that, Elena-senpai...?" Maria asked.

"Whoaaa, that's incredible~" Alisa remarked, unable to help as she marveled in amazement as well.

"Fufuuu, this here's the true power of a lewd Onee-san, y'know?" Elena proudly boasted, her voice along with the girls' murmurs of admiration fully reaching Masachika's ears.

Then, he heard the rustling of Alisa and Maria standing up, joining Yuki as they walked toward her.

“It’s true, you really are like a lewd Onee-san, aren’t you...?” Yuki agreed.

“Isn’t this, um... what you’d call victory underwear?” the former inquired.

“Wooow~, so cuuuute~,” the latter gushed. “Where’d you buy iiit~?”

“O-oh, you guys sure are looking really close, huh...?” Elena said in a stammer, shrinking back slightly from the curious reactions of her juniors.

“This is just a simple question, but... doesn’t this strap here get itchy?” Alisa asked, pointing with her finger.

“What goes on with this part...?” Yuki followed up with a question of her own.

“Wooow, loooook~. It’s see-through heeere~” Maria pointed out enthusiastically.

...Strap? See-through? The heck kinda underwear is that...?

Their irresistibly suggestive words flew around the room, vigorously arousing Masachika’s curiosity.

Real lewd underwear: something that would naturally fascinate any healthy teenage boy. The thought alone made his self-control waver dangerously.

“Um, being stared at so much is sort of...” Elena uttered, trailing off bashfully. “Or rather, being the only one in underwear while everyone else is in their uniforms makes this pretty embarrassing...”

“Don’t say that, Elena-senpai. That’s all part of your punishment too,” Yuki reminded her.

“...Pweeh.”

That sounded like those pathetic kinds of noises you’d find in those free sound effects libraries, Masachika mentally jested in response to the small-animal-like sound that faintly reached his ears.

Just then, a devilish Yuki and an angelic Masha popped into his mind.

“You’re curious, aren’t ya? You should just take a peek, y’know?” the former baited him. *“C’mooooon~, no one’s gonna notice anyway. Besides, it was Elena-senpai who said she’d show it all to you if she lost herself, remember?”*

“You mustn’t! You absolutely mustn’t!” the latter pleaded. *“You understand this yourself, don’t you? That looking now will make you really regret it and feel all depressed after!”*

“Better to regret doin’ it than regret not doin’ it!!!”

“Kyaa! Aaaaaaaaah!” the angel screamed, instantly blown into the void following a D1 college American football-esque tackle from the devil...

“Um, this... was actually a gift from a junior in the wind ensemble club that I couldn’t refuse...!” Elena attempted to explain in a panic, just as Masachika peered his eyes open. “So it’s why saying the price and... those kinds of things... is a bit... Or rather, can you please let me put my clothes back on now!?”

And amidst her screaming plea...

What a pathetic person I am... I’m sorry, Elena-senpai.

Just as expected, Masachika regretted it within a split second and quietly sank into depressing self-reproach.

[1]: エロナ: Play on her name and the word “erotic” if it wasn’t already obvious.

Chapter 6 - More Than That, It's Onii-chan!!!

“Oh...?”

It was currently after school. Stepping into the student council office after finishing her cleaning duties, Alisa blinked in surprise, finding only Yuki and Ayano there.

“Good work today, Alya-san,” Yuki spoke up first. “What brings you here?”

“Good work today too, Yuki-san... Where is everybody?”

“Sarashina-senpai is with the disciplinary committee. Prez was called by a teacher a little while ago, and Masha-senpai is accompanying him in Sarashina-senpai's place.”

“Ah, is that so.”

“Masachika-kun is with the wind ensemble, is that right?” Yuki asked, turning the question back on her.

“Yes.”

“Well then, seems like it'll just be the three of us for a while. Ayano, tea for Alya-san.”

“Certainly.”

“Thank you, Ayano-san.”

With Alisa taking her usual seat and setting down her bag, Ayano quickly brought her a cup of tea.

“Thank you, Ayano-san,” Alisa smiled.

“Not at all,” Ayano replied with brief words.

Her expressionless face brought a memory rushing back into Alisa's mind: one from a few days ago, from when that very same face had dramatically crumbled.

“Come to think of it, Ayano-san...” Alisa started, drawing a slight tilt of Ayano’s head as she hesitantly broached the topic. “...Uhhh, well... this is a bit late, but... are you okay? About Nonoa-san, I mean...”

Seeming to understand what she meant, Ayano blinked slowly before lowering her head.

“About that... I apologize for showing you an extremely unpleasant side of myself.”

“Ah, no, I wouldn’t... go as far as to say it was unpleasant...”

“Thank you very much for your concern, but I am already fine now.”

“Really? That’s good to hear, but...”

Unable to say anything further, Alisa trailed off with a faint sense of frustration... only to widen her eyes in surprise as Ayano gave her a faint smile.

However, she immediately returned to her usual expressionless face in the next instant, giving a small bow before returning to her seat.

After staring at her closely for a few seconds, Alisa lightly shook her head as if to switch gears before beginning her duties by organizing various financial documents submitted by each club. Then, while glancing at Yuki—who sat across from her as she worked on what looked to be a public relations manuscript—she suddenly recalled the remark that Touya had given yesterday.

*Come to think of it... they are siblings, aren’t they?
Masachika-kun and Yuki-san, I mean,* she thought to herself.

It was something that she couldn’t help but realize all over again, likely because Yuki acting like Masachika’s childhood friend at school didn’t feel out of place at all. To add to that, Alisa had only seen her acting like his little sister for a mere few dozen minutes. Those two factors were probably the main reasons as to why the true nature of their relationship frequently slipped from her mind.

Looking back now, it almost felt as though the Yuki she witnessed back at the Suou household had been nothing more than a fleeting illusion.

“Alya-san? Does something seem to be the matter?” Yuki asked in a gracious, polite tone.

“Ah, no...”

“?”

Receiving just that as a response from Alisa, she then tilted her head slightly in mild curiosity, her refined ladylike smile kept intact. Even a gesture that small carried a certain elegance. Paired with the way her jet-black flowed smoothly over her shoulders, resembling something out of a painting, it made Alisa feel oddly self-conscious as she turned her face away.

That’s right: Yuki-san at school is this Yuki-san, after all... she mused as if to remind herself. As for that Yuki-san... Yeah, let’s forget about her for now.

Having decided that in her mind, Alisa then lowered her gaze back toward the financial documents in her hands.

The two then focused on their respective duties for a while.

That was, until she heard Yuki call her name.

“Alya-san.”

“What?” Alisa asked as she looked back up.

“I apologize; may I have a moment?”

“Sure, I don’t mind.”

“This here is an explanation to the entire student body regarding last week’s student assembly...” Yuki spoke, showing her a manuscript. “I’d like you to check whether there are any issues with it, Alya-san.”

“Understood.”

Letting out a small gasp out of surprise, Alisa took a look. It regarded a matter that had deeply concerned her too, of course, one complicated by the fact that only certain details surrounding it could be made public while others absolutely could not. She read through it carefully.

...Mm, it looks fine for now. I'd still like to get Masachika-kun's opinion on it later, though...

Her partner had the sharper eye when it came to seeing through hidden motives in writing or attempts at subtle manipulation, after all. It was something that Alisa acknowledged and relied on.

"I think it's fine," Alisa said as she finished reading Yuki's manuscript. "You'll have Masachika-kun and Prez check it later too, right?"

"Yes, that is indeed the plan," Yuki assured.

"Then I don't see any problems."

"Thank you very much."

"Oh, there is one typo though, you know?"

"Eh, are you sure?"

"Look, here..."

"Ahhh, you *are* right! Thank you very much, Alya-san."

Smiling gently, Yuki corrected her manuscript as Alisa settled back into her chair.

"By the way, Alya-san. How far have you gone with Masachika-kun?" she then asked, casually throwing a question Alisa's way, still maintaining her polite tone.

"Hm? How far...?"

"I obviously mean *this*, y'know?"

Putting on an elegant smile, Yuki formed a circle with her right hand and slid her left finger in and out of it in a slow, deliberate motion. And yet, even after witnessing such an unmistakably suggestive display, Alisa still hadn't the foggiest idea as to what she was getting at.

She just somehow felt it was rather crude, and that was it.

"Uhhh... sorry. What're you talking about?"

“Heeeey, Onii-chan,” Yuki called out to an imaginary Masachika in a murmur. *“This one’s more super-duper clueless and smooth-brained than I thought, I’ll tell yaaa~”*

“...Come again?”

Hearing her soft voice, Alisa tilted her head in confusion. Still, with Yuki simply maintaining her refined ladylike smile as if nothing had happened, she gracefully folded her hands atop the desk.

“No, I was just wondering whether there’s any possibility of you and Onii-sama becoming a couple, Alya-san.”

“Eh!?”



“Ah, there’s no deeper meaning behind it,” Yuki clarified. “It’s just I’ve heard that male-female pairs in student council elections often end up dating; Onii-sama and I faced such suspicions ourselves back in junior high too. So... I was only simply curious about what it’s like with you, Alya-san.”

Her words allowed Alisa to breathe a quiet sigh of relief. For a moment, her heart had leapt into her throat, fearing that her feelings had been seen through.

“Oh, ohhhh, that’s what you meant... Or rather... that sort of thing did really happen, hm? Those kinds of suspicions, I mean.”

“*Fufufu*, our situation’s certainly... quite troublesome, is it not? Since, you know, we can’t go around honestly telling people we’re real siblings.”

“Y-yes it is, huh?” Alisa nodded, wondering if it was okay for Yuki to openly say something like that at school as she glanced toward the door.

“It’s fine, you know?” Yuki told her with a smile, seemingly catching her intent. “Ayano’s been keeping watch outside the door.”

“Oh, r-really...? Since when?”

Alisa hadn’t even heard the door open or close, but they had apparently been alone for a while now. After waiting for her to confirm that, Yuki leaned forward from her seat.

“In other words, we’re free to talk about romance as much as we like, you know?” she coaxed. “So, how has it been?”

“How has it been...?”

Taking a brief pause to steady herself, Alisa thought it over calmly.

Of course, things had progressed within herself. Her feelings toward that lazy yet dependable and mysterious neighbor had grown from what was just once curiosity, to fondness, and before she knew it, love.

But the issue that Yuki was asking about right now was strictly the nature of the relationship between the *both* of them.

So, considering how their relationship had changed solely based on the facts, and what there was to it...

“Nothing... There’s really nothing to it, you know?” Alisa told her

“Oh my, is that really so?”

“Yes, nothing at all... Absolutely nothing...”

“...Alya-san? The light’s gone out of your eyes, y’know?”

“That’s not...” Alisa murmured, trailing off with a faltering voice as she tried to deny it.

Because in truth, nothing had happened.

Sure, while the two of them had gone through a lot together and had even done things that felt like dates a few times before... Masachika had basically never expressed any romantic interest toward her. Alisa hadn’t even conveyed her own feelings either.

I mean, I have said some things to him in Russian a few times before, but... Masachika-kun doesn’t speak it, so those don’t count...

At the end of the day, while their bond as partners in the election campaign had deepened, if asked whether there had been any progress between the both of them as a man and a woman... there had been none at all. That was the only way to put it. Because after all, while Alisa had teased and even tried to tempt Masachika at times, she had never consciously once tried to close the distance with him as someone of the opposite sex.

Huh? Could it be a relationship between a man and a woman... doesn’t progress until one of them actually confesses their feelings...?
Alisa wondered, her realization coming far too late.

It seemed so obvious now too.

H-huh? N-no... but, isn't a confession supposed to be the final event in romance? Like, you're supposed to go on a series of dates, nurture your feelings... and only then confess at the end of all of it, isn't that how it is???

She had always believed that that was how it worked, and as a matter of fact, Alisa *had* grown closer to Masachika and witnessed how her affection for him had turned into love. And yet... when thinking about it calmly, if Masachika wasn't doing the same, then the relationship between the *both* of them would simply never move forward.

So, that is to say... unless I confess after the election, nothing will change...? Alisa thought.

And just as that realization left her stunned, her thinking suddenly took a one-eighty like a bolt from the blue.

No, but wait a second? If you look at it the other way... the fact that there's been no progress between us and whether or not Masachika-kun has feelings for me are completely unrelated... isn't that right?

Yep, that was exactly it.

The reason there had been no progress between the both of them was simply because they hadn't gone through the major event of a confession. It was *entirely* possible that Masachika, just like Alisa, had been nurturing his own feelings for her too.

In other words, it's even possible that we already like each other!?

At this absurdly genius realization, the long-absent mini Alyas sprang into life, marching deep within her chest to a sharp *rat-a-tat-tat* of drums.

Maybe... Masachika-kun actually likes me too... but he's just too shy to confess, or something like that...?

At that moment, the image of an embarrassed looking Masachika rushed into her mind, scratching his cheek as he averted his gaze away. The sheer convenience of such a pleasantly comfortable fantasy sent a shiver down her spine, and the mini Alyas inside of her erupted into a squeal of cheers.

【Geez... He's so cute♡,】 Alisa blurted, letting her Russian words slip out along with a strange, amused giggle.

“Alya-san?” Yuki called out to her in a slightly taken-aback tone, sitting right across from her.

And yet, it didn't reach her at all. Because Alisa was already in a field of flowers.

Is there a chance that... things'll progress all at once the moment I confess? If anything, the fact we haven't moved forward as a man and a woman just goes to show how seriously we've been focusing on the election without any impure distractions...

Arriving at such a conclusion, Alisa rapidly regained all her confidence.

Yeah, that's exactly it! We'll continue to deepen our bond as partners in the election, and after that's all over, we'll move forward as a man and a woman. This is totally the logical way to do it!

“Alya-saaan~?”

“!”

Called out once again by Yuki, who had leaned forward across the long table, Alisa snapped right back to her senses.

Huh? What were we talking about again...? she thought as the cogs in her brain started to turn once again. *Ah, right, she was asking me about that: my relationship with Masachika-kun, hm?*

Recalling the exchange from before the parade had begun inside of her, Alisa puffed out her chest as the light returned to her eyes.

“Yes, there's nothing to it!” she proudly declared. “We are...” she continued, pausing briefly to add a soft, 【for now】, “simply partners in the election!”

“What’s with that sudden burst of confidence...?”

Looking at Alisa as she nodded over and over with a look of absolute certainty on her face, Yuki could only lean back slightly in her chair.

“Kyaaa! She said ‘for now!’” the mini Alyas squealed in uproar inside of Alisa’s chest. *“She’s said it, she’s said it!!! She’s told his little sister! Kyaaaa!”*

As they continued to flail about in a frenzy, Yuki straightened her posture.

“But you’ve still shown him your naked body, right?” she asked with a gentle smile.

“I haven’t, okay!?” Alisa immediately denied.

Caught completely off guard by Yuki’s casually dropped, baffling question, Alisa’s eyes went wide, looking as if she was about to scream “What are you even saying!?” at any moment. The mini Alyas that had paraded in her chest all froze at once, stunned into silence.

“Oh my?” Yuki meanwhile murmured with a puzzled look. “But you said he saw you while you were changing into your summer uniform the other day...”

“I was wearing underwear back then! He didn’t see me naked—ah!”

Having rushed through saying that much, Alisa stopped herself, realizing far too late that she had been skillfully led into confession, her expression turning sour.

“...You tricked me, didn’t you?”

“What could you possibly be talking about?”

“There’s no way he’d see me naked *just* from changing into my summer uniform! That’s obvious even to you, isn’t it!?”

“Oh well, I thought that you might’ve perhaps taken off your underwear to wipe your sweat off before changing...”

“Gah...”

Did I go too far there? Alisa instinctively thought, seeing Yuki lowering her brows slightly as she spoke with an almost apologetic meekness.

But still...

I won't be fooled.

That's right, this was something Alisa simply mustn't forget. Although she looked like this now, Yuki's true nature was that of a mischievous little troublemaker. No matter how much she put on that "But I didn't mean to..." look, her actions were 100% intentional. She simply must not be deceived.

"That's right, that's riiight! Don't fall for it!" the mini Alyas inside her chest shouted with pumped fists.

"Anyway," Alisa said as if to clear the air. "I didn't show him myself naked or anything like that... Or rather, it's not like I actually 'showed' him myself in my underwear in the first place! He just 'happened to see,' you know!"

"Is clarifying that really *that* important?"

"It is! I've decided that the only man I'll ever show my bare skin to is the one I'll promise my future to!"

"How heavyyyy," Yuki quipped with a straight face, before tilting her head again as her expression shifted toward one of puzzlement. "But he still saw you even if it was an accident, right? Is that really okay?"

"U-ugh..."

It was *not* okay. Not at all. But still... given that it was an accident, and given that the other person had been Masachika—her first love—it barely passed as acceptable.

Or rather, Alisa decided to treat it as sort of a "pending" matter for now.

That's absolutely right, she reassured herself. We'll just deepen our relationship from now on, become lovers, and someday...

Almost trailing off into yet another fantasy, Alisa shook herself out of it.

Anyway, when that happens, all it'll just mean is that the order's a little messed up. It still won't go against my vow of having just one person for my entire life.

Still, given that was something she couldn't exactly say out loud, Alisa resigned to giving a reluctant nod.

"I mean, but it was only for a moment, I guess?" she admitted. "I've honestly decided to just forget about it..."

"Oh my, is that really so?"

"...Or rather, you're here acting as if this is all someone else's problem, but... you were the one who hid my underwear during our summer retreat, weren't you?"

Recalling all the crimes that Yuki had confessed to back at the Suou household, Alisa shot her a cold look. It was thanks to her that she had ended up being seen by Masachika in an utterly embarrassing state, one that was mortifying for reasons entirely different to just being in her underwear.

"Ah, that *did* happen, hm...?" Yuki remarked, keeping her ladylike composure, albeit smiling with a hint of apology. "I'm terribly sorry about that. I simply just couldn't resist my mischievous intrusive thoughts."

Is that even something you can brush off so lightly? Alisa begged the question to herself, her expression sharpening even more.

"Just so we're clear, I'll be seriously mad if you ever do something like that again, okay?" she warned. "Because the fact that I was seen by Ma—"

Because the fact that I was seen by Masachika-kun was the only reason why it was even remotely acceptable...

Stopping herself in her tracks, Alisa hurriedly swallowed the words she was just about to blurt out.

And yet, Yuki still caught onto the last bit.

“Because the fact you were seen by... who, you say?”

“...Nothing.”

“Shall I take a guess?” she chimed. “You were about to say that it was only remotely acceptable because Masachika-kun was the one who saw you, right?”

Gasping right on the spot, Alisa couldn’t help but flinch at how her thoughts had been read with almost psychic accuracy. Taking her reaction as confirmation, Yuki continued to press further.

“Just what d’you exactly mean by that?” she teased. “As I thought, Alya-san: you *do* feel something for Onii-sama—”

“Th-that’s not it...! It’s not about it being Masachika-kun or anything... it’s... right! The number of people! It’s a matter of how many! If the amount of men who’ve seen me in an embarrassing state is just one, then my chastity’s still safe... That’s all I meant!”

“So in other words, following your own beliefs, you’re essentially saying you intend to eventually marry Onii-sama.”

“I never did! You’re jumping the gun here! Or rather, it’s really starting to feel like you’ve been steering this conversation to that conclusion from the very start!”

“Oh my, is that so?”

“It is!” Alisa exclaimed.

Facing the front of her insistence, Yuki continued to play dumb, still tilting her head innocently.

“More importantly, what about *you*, Yuki-san...?” Alisa narrowed her eyes as she asked. “If it were up to you... um, would you want me and Masachika-kun to... g-get together?”

Wait, what do I do if she says no? she then pondered as the possibility flashed through her mind.

Because in any case, the person sitting right in front of her was the little sister of the person she loved, after all.

“Yuki’s not a love rival after all! Yaaaay~! Yaaaay~! Let’s celebraaate~!” Though she had once felt this way, when she chewed over the matter more carefully now, the little sister of the man she loved was, in some ways, even more troublesome than an actual romantic rival.

Especially after considering the fact that Masachika was—and putting it incredibly lightly—quite the siscon...

Because in the end, all it would take was for Yuki to say something even remotely hesitant like, “Alya-san becoming Onii-sama’s girlfriend...? That’s a bit...”, to erect a sheer cliff right in the path of Alisa’s romance.

If... Yuki-san, as a little sister protecting her dear onii-chan she loves so much, stood in my way...

Struck by such an ominous thought, **snap!**, cracks began to split open right beneath the feet of the mini Alyas in her chest, causing them to scatter in all directions, screaming as they panicked and ran for their lives.

But whether or not she was aware of the anxiety and fear that swirled inside of Alisa at the moment, Yuki simply gave a smile.

“Yes, I do, don’t I?” she casually answered. “I’d be happy for it to turn out that way if possible.”

“Eh—?”

“So, if you’re asking me, and if possible, I’d like for you and Onii-sama to become lovers, Alya-san,” she repeated herself with the same smile, all the while Alisa stared at her with wide eyes.

Then, having fully processed her words, Alisa let out a sharp gasp.

Approval from his little sister: obtained.

A giant champagne tower then emerged out of nowhere as light flooded her inner world. The mini Alyas, now in swimsuits, splashed gleefully atop of it.

Alisa herself almost felt like diving in and sliding down the cascading champagne like a water slide too.

However...

Hold it right there.

Slapping her own cheeks with an audible smack, she forcefully halted her widely racing thoughts. At the same time, she turned to the mini Alyas inside of her, calling for them to evacuate.

Right, don't let your guards down, she announced. We're dealing with that Yuki-san here; we can't rule out the possibility of her setting me up for a fall.

Learning from her past experiences, Alisa then took a deep breath to steady herself.

“Why... is that?”

Her outright straightforward question elicited a soft, mature smile from Yuki: the same expression she had shown to her before at the Suou household... It made Alisa catch her breath instinctively.

“Onii-sama, can't really go on without someone... someone whom he can think ‘I want to do my best for this person’ for...” Yuki spoke with eyes that seemed to gaze somewhere far away. “For Onii-sama, life is not something he lives for himself, but for the sake of someone else... Though he'll... probably just brush it off with a self-deprecating ‘I just don't have a sense of self’ if I put it like this, hm?”

“.....”

It was something that Alisa could easily picture as well, finding herself struggling to find the right words as she faced Yuki's small, troubled smile. With Yuki not pressing her for a response either, she instead folded her hands gently across her chest and continued.

“But in spite of all of that... I really love that part of him: the way he can put his full effort into something when it's for someone else. And that's exactly why... it was just so painful to see him lose sight of his goals after he left the Suou family.”

Her voice was awfully quiet, yet painfully earnest, a tone that caused Alisa to feel her own chest tighten as well. Lowering her gaze without realizing it at all, she clenched at her hands tightly... only for Yuki to gently rest her own over them from across the table.

“But that’s exactly why... I was happy,” she spoke softly, meeting Alisa’s startled gaze as she looked up at her. “That Onii-sama had started to walk forward once again, after gaining the goal of facing the election together with you, Alya-san. It’s why... I really am truly grateful to you.”

“Ah...”

“So thank you very much, Alya-san. For helping Onii-sama move forward. And if possible, I hope you’ll keep walking beside him from here on as well... and become his guiding light.”

“I-I...”

Maybe it’s okay to tell her now? Alisa thought, the idea suddenly surfacing in her mind as she received all of Yuki’s sincere emotions.

Because wouldn’t it be okay? Surely the Yuki in front of her now would accept it all without teasing her, dare I say even support her, if she were to confess her feelings for Masachika.

“I...!”

As if partially driven by her instincts, Alisa began to open her mouth...

Only for Yuki to suddenly pull her hands away at that moment, raising both of them up.

“Just kidding, ya knooow~?” she chimed.

“...Eh?”

“My apologies, I didn’t mean to put any kind of strange pressure on you. Because if I’m being honest, I don’t really mind who ends up becoming Onii-sama’s girlfriend, you know?”

“Ehhhh...?”

Feeling as though the rug had been pulled from under her, Alisa gave a stunned look, drawing out a small chuckle from Yuki.

“It really doesn’t matter who it is, you know?” she said with a shrug. “As long as it’s someone who’ll make Onii-sama smile from the bottom of his heart... anyone’s fine.”

“Yuki-san...”

“But oh well, on the flip side, I’ll kill her if she’s some trashy woman who’ll make him unhappy.”

“Haha...” Alisa laughed awkwardly with a smile devoid of any negativity.

Though Yuki had spoken in a joking manner, there was no doubt that she was serious.

Because it must simply be her true feelings.

All Yuki simply wanted was for her beloved brother to be happy. It was a feeling as common as it was genuine, and one she clung onto with all her heart.

“Got it... *Fufu*, I understand now.”

“Well, whoever it is will eventually be my sister-in-law too, right?” Yuki remarked in response to Alisa’s chuckle. “So I’d be happy if she’s someone who’ll get along with me too, you know?”

“Ah, yeah... Well that’s only natural, isn’t that right?” Alisa agreed, nodding with a composed expression on the surface as if to hum an “Mm-hmm.”

In other words, someone like me, right!? yet she smugly grinned inside.

“Oh, that’s right. I’d prefer it if she’s beautiful if possible.”

In other words, someone like me, right!? Alisa asked herself once again, albeit with way more conviction this time.

“Oh, I’d also be even happier if boobs were huge.”

In other words, someone like me... hm?

“Preferably with a huge butt and nice plump thighs too. And a personality that’s fun to tease, I’ll tell you!”

That’s... in other words... me, right!?

“And that’s why you’re his ideal match for me, Alya-san!”

“I’m not sure how I’m s’posed to feel about that!?” Alisa exclaimed, raising her voice in a confused protest as such shameless desires were thrown her way head-on.

“*Ufufu*,” Yuki softly chuckled in response, before then suddenly looking upward as if struck by a thought. “Ah, but if we’re going down that route... then Masha-senpai might be ideal too, hm? She’d probably get all affectionate and would always be asking for skinship if it’s her we’re talking about.”

“Eh?”

“*Ufufu*, being Masha-senpai’s li’l sister-in-law, taking baths together and having pillow talks with her... I’d really love to try that!”

“.....”

Alisa could only sit in silence as her own older sister—someone who had looked to get closer to Masachika as of late—was suddenly put forward as a candidate. Her presence as an unexpected ambush... and the mental image of her getting along with a younger sister-in-law in place of Alisa now overlapped with the scene from yesterday: Maria being all happy from being called “Onee-chan” by both Ayano and Yuki. All of it sent a sense of unease stirring right in Alisa’s chest.

“It’s not like... I don’t like skinship or anything though...” Alisa said, trying to brush it off as she flipped her hair back.

“Oh my? Is that really so? You usually seem all reluctant when Masha-senpai clings to you...”

“That’s just... um... because she won’t stop if I spoil her... It’s not like I mind it... As long as it’s within reasonable bounds, then even I...”

“Hmm~?” Yuki purred in a slightly skeptical tone, watching Alisa as she began to trail off.

“Wait, it’s not like that means anything, okay?” Alisa asserted in response, snapping back to her senses as she narrowed her gaze toward Yuki. “I’m just saying I don’t go out of my way to *avoid* skinship itself... That’s all!”

“Hm... is that really so? Okay then, is something like a greeting hug fine?”

“A hug? I mean, we do that at home too, so I think it would be...”

Like, those are basically hugs, right? she thought, recalling the cheek kisses she does with her family.

That is, placing your hand against another person’s shoulder while lightly touching cheeks.

Still, unbeknownst to her, the “hug” that Yuki was referring to went far beyond what Alisa was imagining.

“Are you really sure it’s fine?” Yuki asked. “Because *our* hugs don’t just use arms, we use legs too.”

“Eh? Legs?”

“Yes, we hug each other with not just our arms, but our legs as well.”

A line dropped so casually, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. It left Alisa confused as she tried to picture it.

Hugging each other with their arms... and their legs too?

What came to her mind was an utterly ungraceful sight: an almost comical image of someone clinging to another person with their legs wide open.

“Ngh,” Alisa grimaced, letting a strange voice out from the back of her throat as she shot Yuki a reproachful look, deciding that she was being teased. “There’s no way a greeting like that exists.”

“Ehhh? We really *do* that sorta thing though...” Yuki refuted while sitting with her head tilted in confusion.

“Listen here...” Alisa grumbled, raising her voice tinged with a hint of irritation.

But just then... the door to the student council office swung open, and in came Masachika.

“Good work guuuys,” he sang as casually waltzed into the room.

And in the blink of an eye, Yuki set off dashing.

“To be precise: like this!!!” she shouted boldly, ripping off her refined ladylike façade as she rushed up to her brother.

Springing off the ground with a boing, she wrapped both her arms and legs around him, latching onto him completely.

“And then like this!!!”

Booming once again, this time in a deep, rough voice, Yuki rubbed her cheek against him over and over, fawning over him with a “Yaaaay~♪, Onii-chan’s heeere~♡,” immediately switching to a sweet tone.

And then finally, she unleashed her finishing touch.

“What’s more: this!!!”

Declaring that once more, Yuki grabbed Masachika by the shoulders to lift her own body up before locking her legs right around his chest, squeezing his head tightly against her.

“Welcome baaaack~♪, Onii-chaaaan~♡”

Still speaking in that extremely sugary voice, she rubbed her cheek against the top of his head in a series of quick, circular motions, before then glancing back over his shoulder at Alisa.

“Alright, wanna give it a go?” she asked, giving her a confident thumbs up.

“There’s no way I’d wanna, would I!?” Alisa snapped back instinctively, all the while Masachika—who had barely even stepped a foot into the room before being ambushed—muffled a strained voice from within Yuki’s chest.

“...*Whaf ish this?*”

“Hmm~?” Yuki hummed at her brother’s squashed voice, sliding down his body, burying her face into his neck while still clinging onto his torso. “I was just thinkin’ I’d teach Alya-san how *our* hugs work. Huggy huggy.”

“Don’t bite me.”

With his little sister still latched onto him, Masachika smacked the back of her head with an audible thwack.

Eh, “bite”...? Alisa chewed over his words, having noticed Masachika’s wince as Yuki sank her teeth into him. Wait, this feels like déjà vu...

Masachika being bitten, and on the neck at that. Such a combination sent her thoughts down memory lane as she furrowed her brow deeply... Recalling it all, she remembered how she had noticed the bite marks on Masachika’s neck from back when she had visited the Kuze household during the summer break.

Ah! she gasped as the realization hit her. So that was this sort of thing...

It was something that Masachika had simply brushed off as a result of fooling around with pro-wrestling moves at the time... But still, judging from the scene unfolding in front of her now, this kind of dynamic looked to be an everyday occurrence.

“.....”

The sight of someone else throwing her whole entire body onto Masachika, the man she loved, pressing her lips against his neck. And worse still, the fact that the girl in front of her was doing it as a mere casual greeting.

【But he’s *my* partner...】 Alisa muttered quietly in Russian, pushed on by a small flame that seemed to flicker to life deep within her chest.

As if sensing that stir of emotion, Yuki turned her head while still clinging to Masachika.

“Ooooh, Alya-san’s jealousy sure is heavy,” she mocked, giving an exaggerated shiver before turning back to her brother and tacking on a lame pun. “Guess that makes you a *heavysitter*.”

“Quit making it sound like I’m some sorta weird babysitter.”

“But you *are* a real babysitter, y’knooow!?”

“I don’t need a baby *this* big.”

“Waaah, waaaaaahhh~” Yuki wailed, flailing around as she made baby-like cries while still clinging to her brother.

“D’you have like no sense of shame?” Masachika jested in exasperation.

With the whole scene leaving Alisa completely dumbfounded, Yuki set her hands on Masachika’s shoulders in the next moment, stretching her body backward into a deep arch.

“Whoa, careful...!”

With Masachika frantically leaning back in an effort to fight for his balance, she ended up staring straight at Alisa from a mildly mortifying upside down position.

“So yeah, it’s basically just *this* all day every day at our place. Think ya can handle that?”

“...Impossible,” Alisa answered in an instant, her voice devoid of any life.

“Let your guard down there, didn’tchaaaa?” Yuki grinned, letting her long black hair hang down toward the floor. “Cause Alya-san, you never thought I’d show this side of myself at school, eh?”

With the nail having been hit on the head, Alisa could only catch her breath in surprise.

“Ya fool! I’m *always* lookin’ for any chance to get all lovey-dovey with Onii-chan!” Yuki declared with a triumphant smirk. “Didja really think I’d hold back around you just ’cause my true nature’s out, Alya-san!? What a shame! If ya can’t cut yourself into this sorta vibe, then there’s no room for you at all as long as I’m around!!!”

Her words were so rough that it actually made Alisa stagger a step back, flinching in shock to the type of provocation you’d only hear from a stereotypical yankee.

Snorting lightly in response, Yuki then raised herself back up, clinging onto Masachika again as she rested her shoulder on his chin.

“So yeah, I guess Onii-chan’s gotta marry Ayano at this point, hmmm~?”

“Eh!?” Alisa gasped lightly in response to Ayano being suddenly thrown into the mix.

“Wait, give me a sec...” Masachika let out a worn out voice on the other hand, seemingly not having the bandwidth to react. “You’re hitting me with *way* too much info here; it’s actually freaking me out. Seriously...”

“Just marry Ayano alreadyyy,” Yuki continued without a pause, ignoring the fact that she was completely overwhelming him. “Let the three of us live happily together forever, okay?”

Sharpening his expression in an instant, Masachika glanced toward the door behind him... Specifically, toward Ayano on the other side.

“*Fufufu...*” Yuki chuckled. “It sure sounds fun, y’know?”

Her softly whispered words left Masachika momentarily silent...

And yet, after a brief moment, he let out a small chuckle of his own, gently placing a hand on her back.

“...Yeah, maybe,” he agreed.

“*Mhm.*”

“.....”

Before Alisa knew it, a warm little world had formed right in front of her, one that left her out entirely, and one where Masachika’s wife had been decided on without her.

In that instant... something snapped within her.

“I’ll do it,” Alisa declared.

“Hm?”

“Oh really?”

Marching straight toward the siblings who stared at her with equally puzzled expressions, Alisa grabbed Yuki by the scruff of her neck, practically yanking her off as she placed her hand firmly on Masachika’s shoulders with an intense gaze.

“Wh-whoa, what’s gotten into you?”

“I said I’ll do it...” Alisa gruffed. “*That*. That was how greetings are at the Suou family, wasn’t it?”

“No, no, no, that was obviously a lie!” Masachika exclaimed, frantically shaking his head with the realization of what she was about to attempt. “There’s no way you’d pull it off even if it wasn’t anyway, you know!? You’d fall, Alya!”

“What, are you saying I’m heavy!?”

“I mean, you’re heavier and bigger compared to Yuki, no!?”

“How rude!”

“But it’s true... I mean, sure, I *might* be able to manage it if I’m allowed to hold you by your legs here, but that’ll basically just make it—”

“The station bento position^[1], hm? I get it,” Yuki interjected.

“Stop it!!!”

“Station bento...?” Alisa questioned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, that’s...” Masachika stammered.

“What? Say it clearly already.”

“I *can’t* say it outright; it’s why it’s slang, y’know!?”

The two continued to bicker noisily, going back and forth. A moment in which Yuki could only watch from the sidelines.

“*As I thought, you do like him, huh?*” she murmured quietly under her breath.

Her voice, amused yet tinged with a small sense of loneliness, never reached the arguing duo.

[1]: 駅弁 (ekiben), literally just railway (駅) and the first syllable for bento (弁), hence station bento. It's specifically used as slang here for the standing up sex position, since, y'know, station bentos are usually eaten while standing up and waiting for a train or something.

Chapter 7 - Finding the Campaign Promise

“By the way, what kinda campaign promises are you going with, Alya-san?”

A few days had passed since the entire debacle at the student council office. The four of them—that is, Masachika, Alisa, Takeshi, and Hikaru—were currently in the classroom eating their lunches, with Takeshi being the first to strike up a conversation.

“Campaign promises...?”

“Ah, no, I’m just curious, y’know?” he clarified. “Since you know how it’s basically expected for candidates to touch on their campaign promises in their speeches during the second semester’s closing ceremony...? It just sorta got me wondering.”

Watching him wave his hand in front of his face as if to say that there was no deeper meaning behind it, Alisa fell into thought.

Though she had certainly heard about such a closing ceremony tradition from quite a while ago, there was no denying that she still hadn’t decided what exactly she would say.

What should I do...

She was at a complete loss for words.

“About that... Look, consider it somethin’ to look forward to at the actual ceremony,” Masachika chimed in, jumping in from the side to help her out.

“Eeeh~? For reaaal?”

“Oh, the current president’s campaign promise was about changing the summer uniforms, right?” Hikaru noted.

Hearing Takeshi whine, he caught Masachika’s glance, quickly helping to change the subject.

“That *was* his main promise, huh?” Masachika murmured. “I think he also mentioned making a bunch of smaller changes to things that were pretty outdated too, though...”

“Ohhh, that’s right, huuuh? It’s seriously amazing that he pulled all of that off. Like, honestly, I’d thought that there’d be no way any of that would work when I first heard it...”

Seeing Takeshi immediately taking the bait, Masachika shrugged with a small smile.

“Oh well, making all sorts of false promises can at worst getcha a vote of no confidence, y’know? So I guess we actually follow through on stuff like that here, unlike real politicians.”

“You say that as if real politicians never keep their promises...” Hikaru replied with a wry smile. “No, wait, yeah, nevermind.”

Putting a hand to her chin, Alisa glanced at the ceiling. “A vote of no confidence, hm? Is that when a student assembly declares... the sitting president and vice president unfit for their positions, by any chance? Has that actually ever happened?”

“Hmm, not that much in recent years, apparently...” Masachika answered. “Ah, but, I’ve heard ’bout this story from around five years ago where they supposedly got stripped of their eligibility for the Raikoukai, y’know?”

“Eh, seriously?”

“Yep. They actually weren’t removed from being president themselves though... Wait, actually, now that I think about it, being told you can’t join the Raikoukai but still being made to work ’til the end sounds pretty rough, don’t it?”

“True...”

“Like, right? It’s basically just unpaid labor at that point.”

“Why did that specific president get a vote of no confidence, by the way?”

“Hmm... If I recall it’s ’cause they failed to fulfill a campaign promise. Guess I forgot the details.”

“Speaking of campaign promises...” Hikaru interjected, suddenly speaking up as though a thought just occurred to him. “The light music club was apparently banned ’til just a few years ago, right? At least until the president at the time gave them the okay, or something.”

“Eh, for real?” Takeshi chirped. “Even *I* didn’t know that.”

“Yeah. Well, I mean... it wasn’t actually *just* the light music club, you know?” Masachika added. “There was this sorta period where requirements to form a club were absurdly strict, at least compared to now... Or rather, it was basically like an impossible game, so that president you’re thinking of campaigned on easing those restrictions and actually made it happen in the end, basically.”

“Ooooooh.”

As Masachika gave a more detailed explanation to Takeshi, Alisa tilted her head in curiosity. “What do you mean by it was impossible to form a club?”

“Hmm. Basically something ’bout how only clubs deemed ‘worthy’ of Seirei Academy were allowed to exist, or something? From what I’ve heard, all it took was a teacher to decide something like, ‘This club is not suitable for this school,’ to get your proposal rejected.”

“Even if they had enough members?”

“Even if they did. It’s why clubs like the wind ensemble or piano club were fine while the light music club was basically a no-go.”

“Why?”

“Who knows? Apparently there was this kinda view that bands are for delinquents back then, or something?” Masachika remarked, glancing toward Hikaru and Takeshi, earning nods from the both of them.

“I’ve heard from my parents that there really was a time like that, actually,” the former said.

“Yeeeeeah,” the latter hummed. “Good ol’ rock bands were the sorta groups that rebelled against society and its norms and stuff, ya know? I’ve honestly heard some pretty outrageous stories about them too.”

“Eeeh?” Alisa tilted her head. “Is that so? I didn’t know that at all.”

“Nobody’s got that sorta prejudice against rock bands anymore nowadays though,” Masachika said with a wry smile. “I guess this school’s just behind the times, after all. Like, they did ban them ’til *only* a few years ago and all.”

He shrugged.

“Oh well, with all those restrictions loosened and stuff, all sorts of clubs popped up one after another, including the light music club... And that meant they ended up running outta classrooms pretty quickly, causing a whole mess like what happened the other day, you know?”

“Ahh...” Alisa breathed, understanding the catch.

Scratching the back of his head sheepishly, Takeshi hunched his shoulders. “But man... I kinda feel really bad that you got dragged into this whole conspiracy just ’cause our club wanted a new room, Alya-san...”

“Eh? Ah, that’s not really something you need to apologize for, Takeshi-kun...”

“No, seriouslyyyy,” he whined, half grumbling and ignoring Alisa’s slightly bewildered response as he recalled what happened back then. “I never thought things would turn out like that. Sure, I did think our clubroom was cramped and inconvenient and all, but I never imagined we’d actually go and negotiate with the piano club... And, like, we got this whole student assembly out of nowhere, with the vice piano club’s president getting seriously cornered and lookin’ all pitiful. Only for these random bunch of people to start showing up outta nowhere too, huuuh?”

“Yeah... Honestly, even *I* had no idea what was going on...” Hikaru added. “You really handled it calmly though, didn’t you, Alya-san?”

He gave a look of admiration, with Takeshi joining in as he vigorously nodded in agreement.

“Exactly! We were all watching from the audience, and maaan, you were seriously cool! I was like, woooah, she’s amazing!”

“Th-thank you...”

“No like, seriously, it gave me the chills, ya know? I mean, from the way you quietly struck back at all those guys who set up all that fraud, Alya-san! Like, it kinda somehow even made me feel proud as your former bandmate too, or something like that... It also... actually became a huge topic in the light music club as well!”

“Eh, really?” Alisa asked, rapidly blinking her eyes.

“Yeah,” Hikaru confirmed with a gentle smile and nod. “Alya-san, a lot of people were saying you looked really cool back there, you know? No, well, you already had a ton of people from the light music club who liked you from back when you were performing with us at the cultural festival, though... But judging by how things are now, almost everyone there will probably vote for you in next year’s student council election, don’t you think?”

“*Eeh!? ...Really?*”

His words bewildered Alisa, unable to bring herself to believe them.

“Well it’s honestly not *that* strange, is it?” Masachika remarked as though it were only natural. “Like from last week when we were searching for *that* person with Tsukamoto-senpai too: there were a lotta people who were clearly for you, ain’t that right?”

“Ah, *ahh*, well...”

In fact, Alisa was only met with constant praise for how she had acted during the student assembly everywhere she went, with many even offering warm words of support.

Still, maybe because it hadn’t truly hit her yet, she continued to tilt her head in puzzlement, as though it were actually happening to somebody else.

It was something that Takeshi and Hikaru could only smile warmly at.

“We’re really gonna have to make you face reality during the second semester’s closing ceremony, huuuh?” the former mused.

“Haha, now ain’t that right?” the latter agreed. “Alya-san, I think you’d be surprised, you know? With just how many people are rooting for you right now.”

“...Really?”

With Alisa’s timid doubt showing once more, Takeshi and Hikaru glanced at each other and laughed.

However, as though he suddenly noticed something, Hikaru turned toward Masachika...

“Oh right. We sorta just let that slide just now, but... you were referring to searching for *that* mastermind back there, amirite?”

“Hm? Ohhh... I mean, yeah, I guess.”

“Ooooh” he hummed in with interest. “So they’ve apparently got caught or something, huh? Wasn’t it... Kimishima-san who got to them? I heard they were let go due to lack of evidence though...”

Though that was how the official story went, the reality was that the real mastermind had never actually been caught... Even more so, the other true mastermind—who had attempted to frame Alisa during that very student assembly—had actually been Nonoa, something that neither Hikaru nor Takeshi had any way of knowing.

And it was all something that Masachika had no intention of letting them in on.

“Yeah, something like that,” he simply nodded with a straight face. “Ah, just sayin’, but I can’t exactly go talking ’bout who it was, okay?”

“Oh, well that’s expected, I guess?” Takeshi said with a shrug.

“Hmm, gotcha...” Hikaru followed in tow. “But man, it really makes you wanna know, amirite? Like Takeshi was saying earlier, that certainly was one heck of a twist... but now that I think about it, that logically only means the mastermind had been orchestrating it all from the start, hadn’t they?”

Takeshi fell into a stunned silence, blinking repeatedly as though the realization had only just hit him. "...Huh? Ah, so was that what it was?"

"Haha," Hikaru chuckled wryly in response. "But really, that has to be what happened, right? That sudden summoning of a student assembly too: that probably was just the mastermind pulling strings behind the scenes. Isn't that not it?"

"Huuuh!? Ahhh, I get iiiit... Ohhh, so that's how it was, huuuh...? Man, now I'm even more curious 'bout who this mastermind really is!"

With that, Takeshi suddenly leapt forward toward Masachika.

"C'moon, *tell me secretly, okay?*" he sneakily whispered, raising a hand right beside his mouth. "*For friendship's sake!*"

"Not a chance. I've got confidentiality obligations, ya know?"

"Gaaah! For real!? I'm sooo curious though!"

Seeing Takeshi blatantly wear his heart on his sleeve, itching with both curiosity and an immense dissatisfaction, Masachika and Alisa could only exchange glances, letting out slightly bittersweet smiles as Hikaru watched it all with a blank sense of puzzlement...



"Hey."

"Hm?"

It was now after they had finished eating, with everyone preparing for the afternoon classes. Having heard Alisa quietly call out to him from his side, Masachika confirmed that the teacher had still not arrived before leaning in slightly toward her.

"*What's up?*" he asked, whispering back.

"*Um, it's about Nonoa-san...*"

"*...Ahhh.*"

Fully understanding what she meant with those words alone, Masachika briefly glanced toward Hikaru in the seat ahead, quickly shaking his head from side to side.

“There’s no need to tell them that. No one’s ending up happy even if we did, don’tcha think?”

“Yeah... That’s right, huh?”

In truth, the chances of Nonoa doing anything suspicious to Takeshi or Hikaru were pretty low at the moment, with the real issue lying in the risk of her doubling down if they learned the truth. It was a line of reasoning that Alisa probably understood too.

“.....”

Even so, Nonoa was still a bandmate to Takeshi and Hikaru, and that very fact alone left Alisa completely restless. Because, at the end of the day, they were two people she probably considered as friends too.

I mean, I can’t say I don’t understand her dilemma and doubt over whether it’s really okay to leave those two in the dark, but still... Masachika mused, fully understanding his partner’s feelings.

He shrugged deliberately, his tone light. *“I mean, it’s not like you need to know someone’s true nature to get along with them, y’know? You and Yuki were like that too, no?”*

“Ah...! That is true, right?”

Presented with such an easy-to-understand example, Alisa let out a small wry smile.

“So, well, just don’t worry about ’em,” Masachika cheerfully continued, smiling back at her. “Look, just go ahead and think ’bout those campaign promises that Takeshi was talking about instead.”

“Hey... I don’t appreciate being spoken to as if I haven’t been thinking about it at all, okay?”

“Ohhh? That sooo?”

Pulling himself back from his leaning position just as the teacher entered the classroom, Masachika then added one final remark.

“Oh well, you’ve got almost a month ’til the closing ceremony. Feel free to take your thinking ’bout it, okay?”

A suggestion delivered with such casual ease.

And yet, it would only take Masachika a few hours to realize how naïve that way of thinking had been.



“Okay then, I take this to mean the piano club’s continued existence has officially been decided, correct?”

“Yeah. I mean, they did properly get their membership numbers back within a month after falling below the minimum, so it is only natural, you know.”

It was now after school. Gathered in the student council office, its members set about discussing the aftermath of last week’s hectic student assembly.

Sat at his usual seat at the head of the long table was the President, Touya.

“Anyway, regarding that whole hunt for the mastermind that Chisaki and you all were carrying out... Just as Kuze had proposed, we’ve announced that a suspect has been caught but released due to a lack of evidence, stopping any further witch-hunts sprawling about on campus as a result. Or rather, it’s really starting to look like this whole fraud incident is apparently being viewed as just part of the elections, I s’pose. In any case, unlike during the cultural festival, no one was actually directly harmed, so it’s not like we’re having a situation where the student body’s seriously trying to hunt the culprit here... If anything, the only thing that’s really been heating up as of late is everyone speculating over who tried bringing down *both* li’l sis Kujou and Kimishima.”

“I’ve done a little digging too,” Chisaki chimed in. “The most popular theory is that someone besides Alya-chan and Yuki-chan is supposedly aiming to be the next student council president and attempted to take down both pairs at once, apparently.”

“Haha, well that’s very typical of this school, amirite?” Masachika quipped, giving a dry chuckle in response to how obvious his two upperclassmen were silently judging the students for being too carefree.

“So,” Touya peered at Masachika through his glasses. “How much of the truth have you lot actually figured out in the end?”

“...Yeeeeeah.”

Slowly shifting his gaze away at his question, Masachika exchanged a glance with Yuki who sat across from him.

However, before either of them could decide how much to reveal, the president merely shrugged.

“Oh well, it is a rule that the sitting student council president and vice president shouldn’t meddle with the current candidates and the election in the first place... I won’t pry if you don’t want to say anything, I s’pose.”

“Thank you for your consideration...”

“Not at all... Still, make sure to not let your guards down; you *can* get the rug pulled out from under you and end up eliminated before the actual election, you know?”

Nodding with a small smile, Masachika accepted his senior’s words of warning. “Yes, understood.”

“Cause the student council really won’t function anymore if we lose any more people than this!”

“Yeeeah. That really does sound like a life-or-death issue, doesn’t it?”

Seeing her brother half-smile at Touya’s rather painfully realistic concern, Yuki smoothly raised her hand up.

“Excuse me, Prez,” she spoke. “I would like for us to discuss that project from before. Would that be alright?”

“Hm? Ohhh... *That*, huh? Sure, go ahead.”

“Thank you very much.”

With a pleasant smile of her own, she then took some documents out from her bag.

That project...?

Not having the foggiest idea what she meant, Masachika exchanged a few glances with Alisa beside him before lowering his eyes to the document that Yuki handed over.

“Eh, a Christmas party...?” Alisa, who had also received a copy, voiced her surprise.

Written on the copies of paper was a proposal for holding a Christmas party on December 24th at school, right after the closing ceremony. It was to be specifically organized by Yuki and Ayano, with volunteer students serving as staff.

For the record, such an event did not exist anywhere on Seirei Academy’s annual schedule.

In other words... this was an entirely new initiative.

“As I had once mentioned at the first semester’s closing ceremony, I intend to listen to the student body’s wishes and hold various events once I become student council president,” Yuki explained. “You could say that this is the very first test of that idea, I suppose.”

Faced with such a casually dropped bombshell and the contents written in the documents before him, Masachika couldn’t help but feel his expression stiffen.

Whoa, whoa, whoa, what’s this...? he begged the question to himself. *Oh, I see now. So Prez had already known about this while it’s complete news to us, huh?*

It was unmistakably an effort to build a track record with the elections in mind and obvious to anyone that she intended to demonstrate that her declaration during the first semester's closing ceremony had not been mere empty words.

I've got no idea how long she's been prepping this for, but... Tsk, this is pretty...

Trailing his thoughts off, Masachika continued to sift through the documents, learning that recruiting the staff needed for the actual event had already been taken care of and that she had somehow already received approval from the school's administration.

At this point, with the project already this concrete, there was nothing he could do.

Had it not been, he could have still likely forced his way into helping organize the whole thing with something like, "It sure sounds tough; lemme help, okay?". That would've made it easy for him to steer things toward a whole "Sure, Yuki *did* come up with the big idea, but it wasn't like it was accomplished through the efforts of the Yuki-Ayano pair alone, you know?" sort of dynamic.

Oh well, I guess that's exactly why she's only showing this to us now.

And as though she sensed those exact thoughts, Yuki clasped her hands together with an innocent looking smile before speaking in a tone that betrayed no ulterior motive.

"That party itself is to be run by myself and my volunteers, so I will not be requiring any assistance from the student council. I do hope that everyone will feel free to join and enjoy themselves by all means, okay?"



"We've been had..." Masachika muttered through clenched teeth. "I never expected that Yuki had been pushing forward with a plan like this."

It was now after the student council meeting. Masachika and Alisa, having returned to Class 1-B's room, were now currently in an emergency strategy meeting of their own.

Naturally, the topic centered on the Christmas party project organized by Yuki, which had only just come to light.

"I know Yuki-san said that and all, but... what should *we* do?" Alisa asked. "Are we joining?"

"We don't really have a choice..." Masachika replied with a bitter expression. "Prez and even Masha-san said they'd both be joining too. Not choosing to attend out of spite here basically just exposes us to the entire student body as petty and narrow-minded."

Stopping to pause for a moment, he then let out a long sigh.

"Still, with a huge event like this, the second semester's closing ceremony is surely getting its spotlight stolen."

"That's right, huh..." Alisa responded to Masachika's grim voice with an equally serious look. "We were just talking about it during lunch too, but... it's basically expected to talk about our campaign promises during that closing ceremony speech, right?"

"Yeah... The whole flow's to introduce yourself during the first semester and touch upon your promises in the second, I guess. In Yuki's case though, she was pretty much already so well-known that introducing herself wasn't even necessary in the first semester, so she was able to basically skip the whole step and jump right to her campaign promises, y'know?"

Saying that much, Masachika then lightly waved the Christmas party documents in his hand.

"And now in the second semester, she'll bring up her promises again and use *this* to give those words some actual persuasive power... Seeing is believing, after all. I guess there's probably not a more effective way to make people feel the vision she has for this school, huh?"

"Right, yeah... Pulling off a project of this scale with just her connections would also show off her ability to execute things, wouldn't it?"

“Yeah. Honestly... I guess against something like this, ordinary campaign promises aren’t gonna cut it if we’re talking about even just catching the student body’s interest, huh? That said, going for impact and making some grand promise would just make people doubt whether it’s actually feasible compared to this project. ‘Sure, that sounds impressive, but can ya really pull it off?’ I can already hear people asking that and all their scoffs.”

“I suppose... that’s how it will turn out, right?”

The more the both of them thought about it, the more perfect this calculated move appeared to be. At this point, it was more than fair to say that Yuki had already cemented her spot as the main character of the second semester’s closing ceremony.

But then, right at that moment, Masachika’s expression shifted as a new thought took hold.

“On the other hand,” he dropped his voice an octave, “if this project ends up more underwhelming than expected, or if some kinda scandal were to happen, then Yuki’s reputation’s getting absolutely crushed. Her approval among the student body would probably plummet too, but...”

However, after lowering his eyes right to the written proposal once more, he immediately shook his head.

“No, she’s probably covered all those bases judging from this document.”

“That’s right, huh?” Alisa agreed. “Besides... I don’t like hoping for our opponent’s failure or anything like that.”

“I mean, I guess, yeah. Anyway, to begin with, our biggest problem’s the fact that the closing ceremony’s now before this Christmas party.”

Shrugging with that in mind, Masachika scratched his head roughly as if to say, “The hell do we even do here?”

Going into this without some sort of counterplan would mean the student body would be completely preoccupied with thoughts of Yuki's Christmas party by the time of the closing ceremony, after all. It was completely possible to imagine Alisa and Masachika's speeches simply going in one ear and out the other.

Inviting Alya onto a school broadcasting session right before the first semester's closing ceremony, and now this too...? Masachika mused. *Her thoroughness with prepping things in advance is just so expected of her, or rather, impressive... No, man, this ain't the time to be admiring her.*

Finding himself unintentionally impressed by his younger sister's meticulousness, Masachika shook his head from side to side.

"So then, what do we do? I did just ask you this at lunch, but do you already have some sort of idea for a campaign promise?"

His tone clearly carried the feeling that he was only "just asking for now."

Still, holding her hand to her chin, Alisa slowly nodded in thought.

"...Yes," she spoke after a moment. "There's actually something that I've been thinking about."

"Oh, really?"

Without even attempting to hide his surprise—or maybe because he simply didn't have any composure left to do so—Masachika widened his eyes and stared intently at Alisa.

Perhaps he had even thought that Alisa had *only* sought the student council presidency merely for its own sake, having nothing in particular she wanted to specifically accomplish afterward.

Well, he would've been correct though... Alisa murmured to herself, giving a faint wry smile.

Because indeed, that had been true during the first semester. All she wanted was to simply stand above everyone, to become someone acknowledged by many others. That had simply been all, and she had never thought about what came after achieving such a feat.

However...

“.....”

The student assembly.

The chaos during the cultural festival.

Masachika and Yuki’s determination to join the Raikoukai for the sake of their own goals.

The temporary alliance she’d formed with the latter due to Nonoa’s betrayal.

All these experiences had given Alisa one specific idea.

Slowly but surely, she put that thought into words.

“I want to...”



Having listened to the vision that Alisa spoke of, Masachika widened his eyes more than ever before. In fact, Alisa herself understood that it was a reaction fully warranted from what she had just told him.

“What... do you think?”

Lowering his gaze at her hesitant tone, the boy in front of her drifted into a pensive silence.

But it was only natural. After all, Alisa honestly had absolutely no idea how such a thing could ever make what she thought of a reality, even after saying it all herself. All she only knew was that realizing such a goal was so daunting that “difficult” would be an utter understatement in and of itself.

And beyond that... what she was proposing directly conflicted with Masachika’s own objective of succeeding the Suou family in Yuki’s place.

But... even so, I...

Holding firm onto the unwavering resolve in her heart, Alisa continued to stare intently at her partner seated across from her...

After a few long seconds, Masachika let out a breath and slowly raised his own gaze.

His eyes...

His eyes, filled with such a resolute sense of resolve, held a look so direct and determined that they seemed to pierce straight through Alisa, feeling as though they gripped right at her heart.

“Got it.”

Short. Simple.

And yet, for Alisa, those very words felt more reassuring than anything else she had ever come across before.

Unable to give a response of her own immediately, she swallowed several breaths before finally finding her voice.

“...Are you sure?”

“Yeah. If that’s your wish.”

“But if we actually... make this a reality...” Alisa trailed off, biting at her lip.

Reading the hesitance at her core, Masachika gave her a reassuring smile.

“There’s no need to worry about something like that,” he spoke in a gentle tone. “What matters to me is... that you become student council president in the way that you want.”

“Masachika-kun...”

His devoted words, so free of hesitation and almost with the spirit of self-sacrifice, filled Alisa’s heart with both an immense joy and pain.

On one hand, she felt truly happy that Masachika was willing to devote himself to her this much, and yet, on the other, the sheer guilt of knowing that she was forcing a wish upon him that ran counter to his own goals sent agony down her spine.

As a countless number of emotions clashed deep within her heart, Alisa lowered her gaze, furrowing her brows tightly as though holding back her tears.

“Don’t make that face, Alya,” then came Masachika’s gentle voice.

Turning her gaze toward him, she found him looking at her with eyes that carried a deep calmness, yet a gaze that carried a strong sense of resolve.

“It’s not like I’m bending over backwards just to support you here. My will is to stand by **you**. That’s why... your goals are my goals too.”

In that instant, the words that Yuki had spoken a few days earlier resurfaced in Alisa’s mind.

“But in spite of all of that... I really love that part of him: the way he can put his full effort into something when it’s for someone else.”

The image of Yuki with her hands clasped right before her chest. The sound of her soft voice, filled so deep with affection. All of it came rushing back to her mind... and made Alisa feel like she was about to cry.

Right... That’s exactly right...

Squeezing her eyes shut and forcing back her tears, Alisa gave a small whisper of her own.

【I feel the same way.】

“Huh?”

“It’s nothing,” she answered, quickly turning away and leaving Masachika blinking in confusion. “Mm, alright!” she stood up with determination. “Then it’s settled: that’ll be the promise we’ll announce at the closing ceremony, okay!”

“Yeah, we’ll go with that, huh...?” Masachika stood as well, scratching his head with a wry smile. “Haha, never thought we’d end up putting forward such a huge promise like this.”

“Oh my? Getting cold feet, are we?”

“As if. I actually get excited when taking on goals worth striving for, y’know?”

His response came instantly, without a trace of hesitation. The smile on his face turned fierce, and a sharp radiance burnt within his dark eyes, as though their spark served to prove that his words held no lies whatsoever...

Taking it all in at once, Alisa shot back a satisfied nod, the fearless gleam in her own eyes contrasting the hesitation she clung onto earlier. “Good then. Let’s blow everyone away with our closing ceremony speech and march proudly into Yuki’s Christmas party.”

“Haha, now that plan sure sounds nice, huh...” Masachika dropped into a theatrical bow. “May this humble servant be entrusted with the honor of being your escort?”

“Yes,” Alisa accepted, meeting his show of extravagance with a poised smile. “Of course. There’s no one else I’d choose.”

“It would be the highest honor.”

Giving yet another polite bow, Masachika placed his hand over his chest.

Blinking lightly in response, Alisa eventually extended her right hand.

“And the kiss?” she asked, her head tilted with a soft smile as he took it.

“Hm?”

“You’ll be supporting me, won’t you? So, wouldn’t it only be fitting for you to seal it with a kiss of oath?”

Egging him on with a somewhat smug expression, Alisa watched as Masachika gave a small, wry smile... before dropping to one knee and lightly pressing his lips against the back of her hand.

“As you say... my princess.”

“Oh my... being called your ‘princess’ doesn’t sound so bad, does it?”

And so, the princess, freed from solitary and no longer untouchable, smiled with a spirited confidence.



The following day, after school.

Masachika, taking a break from having just finished a practice run with the wind ensemble club, suddenly felt an unusual number of eyes on him as he lifted his face from the piano.

Sure enough, a large number of members were staring straight right at him, making him unconsciously recoil back.

“...Uh, what?” he muttered with visible unease, right as the club’s president approached him with an impressed look on her face.

“Maaaaan,” she beamed with awe. “Your playing’s sure got more intense again!”

“Elena-senpai... You really think so?”

“Mm-hmm. Did somethin’ happen?”

“Did something happen, huh...?”

Something *had* happened. Specifically yesterday, from when he had embraced Alisa’s wish, promising her that he would support it.

It feels like... I’m back in invincible mode again, huh? Masachika mused at the thought.

It felt as though he had been silently trekking upward in a deep fog all this while, only for it to suddenly clear, unblocking his path and allowing him a glimpse of the summit he was supposed to reach... That was the sort of feeling that surged through Masachika’s body right now, filling him with a dynamism almost akin to omnipotence.

“...I mean, I guess you could say I got inspired by a hardworking partner.”

“Oh? You mean Alisa-chan?”

“Pretty much.”

“Oho! Now that sounds spicy, doesn’t iiiit~?”

Annoyed at the characteristically suggestive tone in Elena's voice, Masachika stood right up.

"I'm going to the restroom for a sec."

Leaving only those words behind, he quickly exited the music room, with quite the number of female club members following his back with heated gazes.

Not that he noticed any of it, though.

"Oh my?" a voice called out to him in the hallway. "Now if it ain't Kuzecchi."

"Nonoa..."

Met with Nonoa's presence and her characteristic half-open squint, Masachika immediately scrunched his face into a slight frown.

"Ehhh~? That reaction actually kinda hurts, y'knooow?"

Whining playfully in response, she casually smacked his arm a few times with a lazy grin.

"...What d'you want?" Masachika bluntly asked, not even attempting to match her energy at all.

Beckoning him over in response and without another word, Nonoa led him toward the deserted end of the hallway.

"Soooo," she casually began, leaning her back against the wall with crossed arms. "There was that broadcast at lunch today announcin' that Yukki's hosting some Christmas party, right?"

"Yeah."

"I could totally crash it if you're up for it, y'know, Kuzzechi?"

"You little..."

Sharpening his gaze, Masachika fell into disbelief at how calmly she was able to say something so malicious with the same nonchalance of offering to lend someone a textbook...

However, quickly deciding it was pointless, he let out a long sigh.

“No need,” he replied curtly.

“Oh. That so?”

Leaving it at that in response to the answer she most likely expected from the start, Nonoa gave a shrug.

Still, despite her nonchalance, the reality remained that she would without a doubt have followed through had Masachika actually taken the offer.

And that was precisely why he decided to set the record straight.

“Don’t do anything extra,” he sternly warned. “We’ll be showing you something that’ll blow your expectations out of the water soon anyway.”

“Ooooooh...?”

Curling the edge of her lips upward in amusement, Nonoa peered right into his face.

“Have you changed, Kuzecchi?”

“Maybe, huh?”

“Hmmmmmm~?”

Letting that hum slip right from her chest, Nonoa pushed herself off the wall and spun around on her heel.

“Alrighty then, I’ll be lookin’ forward to seeing this thing that’ll quote-unquote blow my expectations outta the water, just so you know,” she teased. “Ah, I’m planning to go to the party too, so go ahead and dance with me if you feel like it, ‘kaaay~?”

Seeing her wave lazily over her shoulder as she walked away, Masachika hesitated for a moment before calling out to her.

“Nonoa!”

His voice stopped her right in her tracks, and she tilted her head slightly to its side. Masachika glossed over his next words carefully.

“I... honestly don’t think I can genuinely call you a friend anymore.”

He really simply couldn't. Not after he knew that her malice could also be directed toward him and Alisa.

"But Alya's different, you know?" he continued, this time in a slightly heavier voice. "Even now, even after all *this*, she still genuinely thinks of you as her friend."

Keeping her gaze forward, Nonoa gave nothing away. Even so, Masachika continued, pleading with the hope that his words might reach her heart, even if just a little.

"Hey... can't you just respond to Alya's feelings as nothing more but a friend? Is that really impossible?"

Silence. For a while, that was all he got.

"If I could do that," Nonoa muttered, eventually turning around, "then I wouldn't have ended up like this."^{[1](#)}

Leaving only those flat words behind, she walked away.

Watching her back disappear off into the distance, Masachika finally turned on his heel and began to walk in the opposite direction...

[1]: Go off, girl; why don't you mow my lawn with that edge? The desperation to be "different" is so cringe and obvious lmao. Like wallahi bro the levels of autism and how corny this shit is is killing me. Woman, you aren't in an Ayanochoochie edit or whatever that character that neurospicy 13 year olds idolize is called. Actual neckbeard redditor main character syndrome behavior.

Chapter 8 - The Two Princesses Face Off

“...Nice.”

Standing in the hallway just before the semester’s closing ceremony, Masachika quietly pumped his fist. The student rankings covered the wall ahead of him, and his eyes had fallen to one specific line: “17th - Masachika Kuze.”

Finishing within the top thirty of students in his year had been a goal he had set back in the first semester. It also happened to be one he had stopped wagering over with his partner Alisa. Even so, getting his name onto such a list had become a standard he felt he needed to achieve.

“Time to go.”

Using his newfound sense of accomplishment that burned deep in his chest as fuel for motivation for the next goal ahead, Masachika stepped onto the battlefield.



“Now then. Moving forward, we would like to invite the student council to give their closing speeches.”

At the emcee’s cue, Touya, the student council president, stepped onto the stage. Remaining on the wings, Masachika and Alisa watched him go.

Just as in the first semester, the order of speeches to be given by the first-year student council members had been decided the day before with a coin toss overseen by Maria. With Alisa having won the right to choose this time around, she had deliberately opted for them to go second.

The reason was simple. With Yuki most likely weaving the Christmas party into her speech, it wasn't hard to imagine Alisa's and Masachika's own speeches being driven out of everyone's minds.

"Yeah, I kinda felt like they'd talked 'bout somethin' pretty amazing, but what happened afterward left such a huge impression that sorta faded into the background, huuuh~?"

That was exactly the sort of reaction they could imagine as a result: one they wanted to avoid.

What was more, by going second, Masachika and Alisa hoped to leave the audience in suspense: hooked on the anticipation that they might once again clear the high bar, just as they had during the first semester's closing ceremony.

In fact, Alya's probably gonna be stealin' all the attention regardless with this campaign promise of hers... Looks like I'll really be just her background support this time, huh?

There was simply no need for Masachika to give the type of eccentric speech that he had given back at the first semester's closing ceremony. All he needed to do today was reinforce the feasibility of Alisa's proposal from the position of someone supporting her.

Huh...? Masachika stopped himself as a new thought crossed his mind. Now that I think of it, ain't this basically the same as when I was Yuki's partner back in junior high?

The realization propped a faint smile across his lips.

In other words, this is what I'm best at, huh?

And at the same time, it also meant that his current partner, Alisa, had become just as dependable a presence as his former one, Yuki...

"....."

Masachika glanced at that very partner beside him as she watched Chisaki give her speech.

Her profile was seemingly still a touch rigid, carrying a trace of tension... But even so, compared to the first semester, when merely just standing on the stage had made her look as though she was on the verge of collapse, Alisa now stood firmly on her feet with a demeanor beyond any comparison.

“Alrighty, Alya-chan,” Maria called out to her. “I’m off, okayyy~?”

“Yes, yes... Have a good one.”

She now even had enough composure to answer her sister with nothing more than a wry smile.

You’ve really become dependable, y’know...? Masachika conveyed to her in his heart. *You really have.*

Feeling a concoction of happiness, admiration, and just a smidge of loneliness wash over him, he shot a small wry smile at himself.

What am I, her dad or something?

Perhaps misunderstanding what he was smirking about, Alisa glanced up his way.

Shrugging, she gestured toward Maria with her eyes. “She really takes the edge off, am I right?”

“Haha. She does, huh?” Masachika nodded, deliberately leaving her misunderstanding uncorrected as he lowered his voice. “But it’s also admirable that *you’ve* got enough room to let your guard down, you know?”

Feeling her eyes widen slightly at his words, Alisa lowered her gaze as though reflecting on herself.

Letting a few seconds pass between the two of them, she smiled faintly and nodded.

“...Maybe you’re right,” Alisa whispered.

Shifting a step closer, she then quietly leaned against him in a soft murmur.

【Only because you were there for me.】

Ngh... Too much composure's a problem too, y'know?

Her unexpected emotional attack nearly threw Masachika off balance, forcing him to rely on his sheer force of will to just maintain his focus.

“Up next, the student council’s officer for public relations, Yuki Suou-san, will now give her address.”

With the emcee’s resonating announcement signifying the conclusion of Maria’s speech, Yuki stepped up onto the stage. Naturally, the appearance of a candidate for the next student council president sparked a different kind of excitement to ripple throughout the gymnasium.

Waving with a smile in response to all the cheers, Yuki glanced toward her brother, who stood watching from the opposite wing of the stage and... narrowed the gaze in her heart.

Ohhh? she hummed to herself. *You sure look awfully relaxed, don'tcha?*

Just a mere glance at his face was enough for her to more or less deduce the state of mind he was in. They were siblings who shared the same blood, after all. As she presently saw it, Masachika seemed to have no concerns beyond simply standing on stage; if anything, he gave off the faint impression of someone who had already finished the job.

In other words...

He's underestimating me.

The need to focus on his supporting role. The belief that Alisa was more than capable of putting up a real fight alone. That was what all Masachika was thinking.

Oh well, I s'pose they've prepped somethin' worthy of warranting that confidence then, hm...?

Conversely, Yuki certainly didn't underestimate Alisa.

All the prep work for the Christmas party—her hidden trump card that would for sure reinforce her campaign promise and seize today’s spotlight—which she had carried out in secret, even from her brother, had come as a result of her renewing her resolve to seriously defeat Masachika. It was the embodiment of her careful and meticulous preparation of every measure necessary to achieve that goal.

And yet, even with all these hidden measures in place... if there was anyone who could deliver a speech worthy of earning an applause that rivaled theirs, it would be Alisa.

That was simply how highly Yuki regarded her.

But even so... her brother’s carefree optimism—assuming that they could willingly turn things around after giving away the opportunity of going first—irritated her.

In other words... he’s assuming that I—that we—won’t be able to completely take control of the atmosphere here, hmmm?

With a vicious fighting spirit flaring right up in her chest, Yuki finally stepped onto the stage.

The words she had declared in her room before resurfaced in her mind.

“I’ll win... and make them realize... that I’m no longer weak or pitiful.”

With a tide of resolve and determination blooming within her, Yuki repeated that vow once more.

I’ll be the one to put you outta your misery, okay, Onii-chan?

And so, concealing the flames that roared behind her refined ladylike smile, Yuki began her speech with dignified confidence.



“As I was just introduced, I am Yuki Suou, the student council’s officer for public relations. So, everyone, how was this second semester for you? I believe that all of you have each gone through a vast array of unique and different experiences. I am aware that this is sudden, but given that this is the closing ceremony, how about we take a moment to look back on the semester, shall we? Everyone, for a little while, please close your eyes and reflect on your memories of these past few months.”

No sooner had Yuki started her address than she fell silent, unleashing a wave of puzzlement to wash over the student body. However, as she continued to keep her silence with nothing but a small smile on her face, everyone present gradually began to retrace their memories, some closing their eyes while others lowered their gazes.

“Everyone, have you all had enough time to reflect?” Yuki spoke again after quietly observing the seated students for a short while. “So, how was it? I imagine that each and every one of you has made many different memories from this semester, but... would it not be fair to say that what came to mind for most were events that have brought about major changes to your daily lives, perhaps?”

Sweeping her eyes over the crowd, she took in the expressions gathered before her.

“For instance, large events such as the cultural festival... or even the sports festival. Or maybe, something personally significant: getting a boyfriend or a girlfriend, or achieving a major milestone within your club activities. Perhaps these were the types of occurrences you thought of: they’re moments when you or those around you underwent major changes, wouldn’t you say? Surely none of you had pictured an ordinary day of classes where nothing special had happened, right?”

Pausing to take a small breath, Yuki adopted a serious expression, abandoning her slightly playful tone.

“As for myself, I believe that what will always remain in the hearts of everyone is change,” she said, her tone resolute. “Changes in everyday life, changes in those around us, and changes within ourselves. For uneventful and flat routines do not leave impressions within the heart. This... is something that I believe all of you have just realized for yourselves.”

Her words elicited a chorus of nods throughout the audience, clearly in agreement. Confirming that her message had taken root among the students, she continued.

“Change: that’s what’s necessary to etch the days you spend at this school more deeply into your hearts for the rest of your lives. Change—*significant* change—is what I will bring about to this school if elected student council president, and it will begin with listening to all of your voices. Not sweeping reforms or radical transformations, but changes that will add color and a little enjoyment to all your daily lives. As a first step toward this ideal, I will be holding a brand-new event today at 4:30 p.m. Something that this school has never had before: a Christmas party.”

By this point, the audience was completely captivated by her speech.

“I am sure that some of you are eager to head home to enjoy the winter break to its fullest, while others have already made plans to go out and have fun with friends,” Yuki smiled, continuing to address the students. “But please consider this. Today’s the only day you can attend a Christmas party at this school, you know? The time you’ll spend relaxing at home, the time you’ll spend hanging out with all your friends: both will be enjoyable, sure, but which do you think you will still remember a year from now?”

The answer to such a question had naturally already sprouted within the hearts of those who were listening. Looking out at the wave of students, who were clearly deeply moved, Yuki delivered her final push.

“So, everyone, I am sincerely asking you to join the Christmas party that I am hosting. Because if you do, I am sure that all my beliefs—my ideals—will be conveyed to you all as well.”

Her words conveyed nothing but an appeal of utter sincerity, one finished with a radiant smile as she continued to meet the eyes within the audience.

“On that note and with this announcement, I would now like to bring my address to a close,” Yuki proclaimed in a bright voice. “Thank you all very much for your attention.”

With those final words, her speech came to its end.

She lowered her head into a bow. Silence lingered for a heartbeat, before thunderous applause erupted throughout the crowd. Accompanying whistles and cheers calling in support for her quickly enveloped the gymnasium, rising in a wave indistinguishable from a standing ovation.



Are you for real? Masachika couldn't help but mutter in his heart. *She's reeeally good at speeches.*

No, he had always known that Yuki was a good public speaker. He knew that, but....

What is this...? A ridiculous power up or something? This girl...

A growing sense of unease slowly crept throughout his chest; the excitement and sense of unity that had taken over the gymnasium far exceeded his expectations. It felt so overwhelming that his own intuition was screaming to tell him that even Alisa's words would never reach the hearts of the audience if she were to give her speech now.

No, thank God Ayano's still gotta go... Alya's voice should surely reach them if the mood settles down a li'l there. Probably...

Though Masachika was fully aware that his thoughts had spiraled into wishful thinking—far from calm and calculating—he had yet to descend into a full-blown panic.

...At least, not yet.



“Thank you very much, Suou-san,” the emcee’s voice once again echoed through the gymnasium. “Next, we will hear some remarks from the student council’s secretary, Ayano Kimishima.”

Hearing her cue, Ayano turned to Yuki before stepping onto the stage. “I will be taking my turn.”

“Mm,” Yuki nodded to her quiet voice. “I’ll leave the rest to you.”

Her words were so simple, yet they carried her complete trust. Ayano could only stop in her tracks as she heard them, continuing her steps after a moment.

As for her closing ceremony speech, Yuki had never specifically instructed her to say this or talk about so and so. It had been the same during the first semester as well. Even when Ayano had asked about what she should talk about, all Yuki had done was tell her to think of it herself. It was surely a sign of the trust she had in Ayano, and at the same time... a testament to Yuki’s belief that parroting the words of someone else meant you could never truly move the hearts of those who were listening.

I have come to understand that now, Ayano reflected.

It was something she had not grasped back during the first semester, and was why all she had done was simply list Yuki’s virtues and strengths as she thought, appealing to the audience for their support. It wasn’t something she thought of as a mistake, per se... but maybe it wasn’t what was needed to move the hearts of others.

Ayano had come to terms with this fact most strongly during the student assembly last month when she had heard the pleas of the vice president of the piano club, Aoi Tsukamoto.

Listening to her appeal from the wings of the stage had allowed her to understand firsthand: rather than words meticulously woven together in one’s mind... a voice that draws from the heart in its most natural and unaltered shape could, at times, move others more deeply.

And that’s precisely why...

I will... say things as they are. About why I wish to support Yuki-sama. All of it.

Holding only that conviction in her heart, Ayano stepped onto the stage, letting her thoughts drift back to the distant past as she slowly began to speak.

“I do not think that all of you know this, but... when Yuki-sama was young, she suffered from severe asthma.”

Murmurs rippled throughout the audience at her unexpected revelation, delivered before she had even bothered to introduce herself. Paying no attention to any of it, Ayano pushed on.

“As a child, Yuki-sama’s asthma had rendered her unable to attend elementary school properly and... she spent most of each day confined to her bed. Vigorous exercise was out of the question, of course, but more than that, she could not even laugh or cry as her heart wished. Both it and her body were bound by illness.”

The initial confusion that weighed on the students gradually, yet steadily, gave way as Ayano’s words sank into their heads.

“But even so, Yuki-sama had always conducted herself as a brave girl on the surface. Even when she could not get out of bed... she spent her days cheerfully, always with a bright smile, so as to not worry her family.”

For a moment, silence settled over the room as Ayano fought past the lump in her throat.

“However, precisely because of that...”

By this point, a crack had formed in her expressionless façade with tension gathering between her brows. Her throat continued to tighten and her normally flat tone contorted as notes of pain made their way into her voice.

“Seeing Yuki-sama whenever she suffered an asthma attack was truly agonizing; truly pitiful... It made I, who could do nothing but stand by her side and watch, feel utterly helpless and heartbroken...”

The air felt drawn tight as a wire, making even those who were listening finding themselves holding their breaths. Perhaps because her throat had completely given way at this point, Ayano broke off her words, taking a long, deep breath as if to compose herself.

“And yet...” she slowly began again after resetting her expression, “even in such unbearable circumstances, Yuki-sama never turned bitter... She never turned sour and remained noble to the very end. As the heir to the Suou family, she resolved to fulfill what was expected of her. She held that oath firmly within her heart and never allowed her illness to break her spirit, working harder than anyone else. It was from watching that noble figure up close that I came to desire to stand in service to her. I truly decided that I wanted to help her with everything I had.”

Her voice, albeit still pierced with small, lingering traces of pain, carried a powerful warmth that shook the hearts of those in the audience.

Whether she was aware of its effect or not, Ayano pushed on once again, now looking straight ahead.

“After that, Yuki-sama overcame her illness and... despite bearing the tremendous handicap of having spent so many of her early years bedridden, she grew into a splendid young lady, showing no signs of such a past whatsoever. Brimming with knowledge and sophistication, she became a paragon of what a lady should be like, someone whom everyone at this school respects and admires.”

Still, this was something everyone present already knew.

“However...” Ayano paused, her voice ringing with absolute conviction, ready to share something no one else could have possibly known. “I know about it all. I know just how precious and rare her presence has truly become. That is precisely why I will continue to support Yuki-sama with all my strength. I will, without a doubt, use everything I have to support her, to assist her. That is my resolve, and the very meaning of my existence as the person known as Ayano Kimishima...”

Her words hung in the heavy silence that followed. Then, as if jolted back to the reality of her audience, Ayano quickly lowered her head in gratitude.

“Thank you very much for your kind attention.”

Stepping down from the stage, she was met with only hesitant, scattered claps... before they gradually grew louder, transforming into thunderous applause.

“Oooooohhhhhh!!!”

“We’re rooting for youuuu!!!”

“Do your beeeest!!!”

Passionate cheers roared one after another as Yuki and Ayano stood together at the right wing of the stage, their heads lowered into a bow.

There was no doubt about it whatsoever.

The stars of the moment were Yuki and Ayano.



Watching the scene unfold from the other wing of the stage, Masachika could not help but grimace at how far the audience’s excitement had exceeded his expectations.

“Wait, wait, wait, wait...” he muttered in disbelief, his sheer panic escaping from his lips.

Oh shit, oh shit. This is... seriously bad. They’ve taken complete control of the room.

To top it all off, Yuki had painted her platform not on that of sweeping reforms or major changes, but rather a multitude of small changes: a position that directly conflicted with Alisa’s own agenda. With an audience won over so clearly and early like this, just how many students would even be willing to listen to her at this point...?

Damn it, I totally underestimated them... I never imagined things would become this one-sided.

There was no other way to describe it but a blunder. He had been so focused on Yuki's supposed hidden trump card—the Christmas party—that he had satisfied himself merely by just preparing something capable of matching just that.

But thinking about it calmly... there was no way that those two, known for preparing everything with intense and meticulous care, would have been satisfied with an ordinary speech in just announcing some party.

Tch, now ain't that right! Why did I assume they'd only play it safe on the day of the dang closing ceremony!?

Masachika had never thought that he was letting his guard down.

And yet... without even realizing it himself, he had grown completely complacent, probably intoxicated somewhere deep down by all this sense of omnipotence that had come with this supposed “invincible mode” he was in.

Now, not even a fragment of that exhilaration remained.

Gah, I can save the regret for later! Masachika desperately racked his brain. Right now's for figuring out how to get through this...!

But just then, a voice suddenly reached his ear.

“Are you okay, Alya-chan?” It belonged to none other than Maria.

Startled by her quiet voice, Masachika turned toward her, only to find Alisa there, standing with her usual stern expression, yet an undeniable air of unease. Beside her was Maria, looking at her with concern... The sight made Masachika want to beat himself senseless for carelessly letting his panic show.

Gah, the heck am I doing...!? I'm the one who said I'd support her...!

But while he ground his teeth in frustration... the moment arrived.

“Up next, the student council's treasurer, Alisa Kujou-san, will now give her address.”

The emcee's announcement rang through the gymnasium, signalling their turn. Without saying even a word to Masachika, Alisa stepped forward with a tense expression.

...Only for Masachika to instinctively grab her hand and stop her.

"Hm!? Masachika-kun?"

Alisa turned around in surprise. Meeting her gaze, Masachika made his mind up in an instant.

"Change of plans," he declared in a resolute tone. "I'm going up."

"Eh? But..."

"Just wait, 'kay?" he forced on a fearless grin to his partner's wavering gaze. "I'll take back the atmosphere for sure."

With the bold proclamation, Masachika strode toward the stage without waiting for a response. A chorus of confused whispers rose from both the audience and the emcee, but he had no room to care about that now.

Oh shiiit. I've got nothing.

The speech he'd originally prepared might as well have been a blank sheet of paper now. It was all winging it from here on.

This ain't even funny...

And he was right. There was nothing funny about the situation at all. All Masachika could do now was bitterly curse at his own carefreeness for not having prepared a backup plan despite knowing that something like this could happen.

Haaaah, he whined in his heart. I'd already gotten carried away with this whole invincible mode I thought I was in last time... Man, I don't ever learn, huh?

Was pushing his brain so far into a corner to avoid reality a form of self-defense? Because mocking himself like this felt strangely out of place even to Masachika.

Still continuing to mock himself, Masachika stepped onto the stage. However, the moment he laid eyes on the rows of students beyond the dazzling lights... a single secret plan suddenly hatched in his otherwise empty head.

The sort of plan that made him derisively chuckle on the inside.

No way... I'm actually gonna have to do something like that.

Alea iacta est. Masachika slowly drew in a breath before unleashing his voice toward the microphone...



This... is pretty bad, is it not? Sayaka discretely furrowed her brow as she joined the surrounding students in applauding Yuki and Ayano.

Having promised to cooperate with the new student council should Alisa win the election, Sayaka had already heard her campaign promise in advance. It was something that she certainly felt would leave a huge impact on the student body, but... only in the case of the audience being prepared to listen.

And here I was thinking this would be a close contest up until those two gave their speeches...

Because the reality was that the atmosphere had not been bad at all right up until then. The number of people who viewed Alisa in a positive light had increased noticeably thanks to her accomplishments during the cultural festival and how she had carried herself in the recent student assembly, after all; you could even hear many voices anticipating what kind of speech she would be giving today.

But now...

Those presently gathered were now deeply moved by Yuki and Ayano, their hearts completely swept away in the tide of their speeches. At this point, Alisa's words would most likely fail to even register in the minds of the audience when they were so caught up in this sort of excitement.

Neither Nono-chan nor I will be lending a hand this time, okay...? Sayaka murmured to herself. *Are you really going to be fine?*

It was only after she begged that question in her heart did Sayaka realize something: somewhere along the way, she had begun to think from the perspective of someone rooting for Alisa and Masachika as if it were second nature.

Wh-what am I even doing...? Did being in a band together make me soften up to her or something...?

Overcome by what could only be described by panic, Sayaka gave her head a small shake before turning her gaze back toward the stage.

I mean, it's not like I'm cheering for them or anything... I merely just don't want to see my friends make a fool of themselves, that's all...

As she found herself mouthing off excuses to no one in particular, the emcee finally called on Alisa's name, thinning the buzzing excitement rippling through the gymnasium into only a few scattered whispers.

However...

For some reason, it was Masachika who stepped onto the stage.

"Hm?" Sayaka murmured, involuntarily letting her confusion slip, the students around her seeming equally bewildered.

"Eh?"

"Huh?"

"Why Kuze?"

Yet, amidst all that chatter, she immediately grasped Masachika's intentions.

Ah, I understand. He's realized that even Alisa-san speaking in this atmosphere wouldn't have much of an effect.

In other words, he would step out first to change the mood before handing things over to her.

Easier said than done...

It was simply just as hard for Masachika to get people to listen amidst the current mood as well, after all. Sure, his unexpected appearance had certainly piqued their interests, but it still wasn't enough to cool the excitement that clouded their heads.

Just how on earth is he planning to turn things around from here...? Sayaka asked herself.

As she watched on with half interest and half concern, Masachika finally opened his mouth atop the stage.

【Дорогие друзья, позвольте представиться. Меня зовут Кудзэ Масатика. Я из общего отдела ученического совета. Разрешите поприветствовать вас в качестве доверенного лица кандидата в председатели совета Кудзё Алисы. 】^[1]

Soooo much Russian. The students collectively blanked. Sayaka, too, stood frozen with her mouth slightly agape.

“Sorry,” Masachika paused for a moment with a soft chuckle. “I was so nervous I actually started speaking in Russian.”

Laughter erupted throughout the entire gymnasium.

“No way that just happens!” a voice that sounded *extremely* familiar came flying out somewhere in the crowd.

Even Sayaka couldn't help but let out a laugh.

Feeling the atmosphere relax all at once, Masachika raised both hands with an easy going smile. “Now then, once again, I'm Masachika Kuze, the student council's officer for general affairs. Oh, that Russian just now? I did have some help from this translation website, okay? Trying to memorize it by ear's actually super difficult though, y'knooow? Pronouncing words in Russian is seeriously rough.”

Sticking his tongue out briefly and shrugging in shoulders in an exaggerated, comical manner, Masachika drew another round of laughter.

“Now then, everyone,” he continued in a casual tone. “You’re all surely wondering why I stepped out here first, aren’t you? Ah, and just to be clear, our emcee here didn’t get the order wrong: this was entirely our own doing. Don’t go havin’ that misunderstanding, ’kay?”

Pressing his palms together toward the emcee, he lowered his head into a bow. “Sorry for taking liberties like thiiiiis.”

Clearing his throat lightly, he faced back toward the audience.

“Now then, to start over, as for why I stepped out here first... Well, there’s only one reason.” The casual air vanished from his voice. “Before my partner here speaks about her campaign promise, I wanted you all to prepare yourselves for what you’re about to hear.”

Having heard a little about the plan beforehand, Sayaka knew that Masachika’s appearance before Alisa had been completely unplanned. Yet, Masachika gave no sign of that whatsoever. His tone and demeanor told the tale that everything was proceeding exactly according to schedule, speaking slowly and carefully as if teaching the audience step by step.

“The campaign promise that Alisa Kujou will be about to present is exceptionally ambitious and—among all past student council presidential candidates—incredibly unconventional and different. I think you all will struggle to understand it at first too. Like, ‘Can you even do something like that?’ Some of you might naturally beg the question. *I* sure did. Honestly, I couldn’t fully wrap my own head around it initially when I first heard what she was aiming for from her own lips.”

Confusion spread among the students at what was an utterly bizarre speech for a student council member’s address. Yet, through that confusion, Sayaka could sense the fervor that had dominated the gymnasium moments earlier being completely rinsed away.

“But,” Masachika continued in clear signal that he was not done, “after listening to her explain all the details and coming to understand what she’s aiming for, for what kind of student council she’s seeking to create... it became something that felt truly wonderful to me as well. I became convinced that it was something worth pursuing seriously—right from the bottom of my heart—and firmly resolved myself to help achieve it.”

Sweeping his gaze across the crowd as confused glances darted from face to face, Masachika anchored the restless room with a low, deliberate cadence.

“I want to tell you all this beforehand: we are absolutely serious. We are entering this presidential election earnestly with this promise, and we fully intend to make it a reality. So please, without laughing it off as empty grandstanding, please listen to her words with an open mind. That’s all from me. Thank you all very much for listening.”



Tch, I’m pathetic, huh...?

Facing the sparse round of applause ringing out here and there, Masachika trotted back toward the wings of the stage, his heart overcome with bitterness.

In the end, all he had managed to do was reset the atmosphere and bring things back to square one. And that was at best. From here, everything else had to be entrusted entirely to his partner. To him, all he could see in the moment were things he should reflect on.

“Good work,” came Alisa’s voice.

“Yeah...” Masachika murmured, returning with his head lowered in apology. “Sorry; I wasn’t much help.”

“That’s not true,” his partner simply shook her head and smiled. “To improvise like *that* and go that far... I don’t think I could’ve done it myself; you really helped me out.”

“.....”

Though her words eased him a little, the reality remained that he had been forced to improvise in the first place because he had been caught flat-footed. His bitter expression refused to soften, unable to shake the immense sense of responsibility that weighed on him. Seeing him like that, Alisa offered a faint smile.

“Geez, don’t make that face,” she nudged his shoulder gently. “I never expected Yuki-san and Ayano-san’s speeches to be *that* impressive either. It isn’t your responsibility alone; we’re a pair, after all... As long as the two of us can combine our strengths to achieve the best possible result, it’ll be okay. I’m right, aren’t I?”

Her gentle question allowed Masachika to finally manage a small smile. “Yeah...” he nodded. “You’re right.”

“Yes. Now’s your turn to watch me, okay?”

No sooner had Alisa said that than the emcee’s announcement rang out.

“Once again, the student council’s treasurer, Alisa Kujou-san, will now give her address.”

Seeing Alisa turn toward the stage, Masachika caught her eye and gave her a small nod.

“Good luck,” he said, his brief words carrying all the faith he had in her.

“Yes,” Alisa let out a soft breath. “Well then...”

Cutting her own words off at that point... she turned back with a small smile.

“I’ll go win this real quick.”



As Alisa stepped onto the stage, countless gazes filled with a mix of curiosity and anticipating turned toward her.

How would she clear the impossibly high bar that Masachika's introduction had raised?

What exactly was this campaign promise he had spoken of?

Everyone eagerly waited for the moment that answer would finally be revealed.

“As I had been introduced, I am Alisa Kujou, the student council's treasurer. Today, I would like to take this opportunity to broach the policies I intend to implement should I be elected student council president for the coming year.”

Her words pushed the audience's anticipation to a fever pitch. The atmosphere was immense and trampled over her from all sides. Nevertheless, Alisa continued calmly, not dropping her unwavering conviction.

“I will,” she paused, gripping the edges of the podium, “abolish the system that limits eligibility for admission into the Raikoukai to only the student council president and vice president.”

Silence. That was all that swept across the students. Even after Masachika's lengthy preface, most were unable to fully process the bold declaration she had just made, remaining sat frozen in place.

“Beyond just the president and vice president...” Alisa leaned forward, her voice cutting through the gymnasium with absolute certainty, “any student within the student council who has achieved accomplishments worthy of earning such a qualification will be allowed to join the Raikoukai.”

It was only with this nail in the coffin that most of the students began to understand what Alisa was putting on the table...

Yet, at the same time, another wave of confusion erupted among them.

“H-huh?”

“Wha? What did she just say?”

“Uh? Wh-what does she mean?”

Their bewilderment was only natural.

Because simply put, at first glance, Alisa’s promise offered no apparent benefit to herself at all. Even if she became student council president and secured her own ticket to being part of the Raikoukai, what was possibly in it for her in petitioning them to extend that same ticket to others? If anything, one would think it offered nothing but risk: the possibility of having her own qualification revoked.

For students at this school, the reason for aspiring to become the student council president was, first and foremost, entry into the Raikoukai. That was the fundamental premise.

Some wanted to join to secure a stable future. Others wanted to join as it was key to making their dreams come true. A number sought admission because it was a duty imposed upon them by their parents.

The details varied from person to person, but the bottom line was that everyone shared the same goal: they wanted to join the Raikoukai.

As a result, those who were elected student council president basically never did anything that could be seen as challenging the Raikoukai themselves. Much less would an ordinary student dare interfere with the very structure of the organization itself.

“Could it be... she wants someone other than herself and Kuze to join the Raikoukai too?” one student suggested.

“Oh...” another wondered. “Is that what this is?”

Though still confused, the audience desperately searched for an explanation that made sense. After hearing the murmurs settle down somewhat, Alisa began with her rationale.

“Since enrolling in this school and working within the student council as one of the candidates for president... I have come to meet many who aspire to join the Raikoukai.”

Pausing briefly, Alisa faced the collective gaze of the audience head on.

“People who have ruthlessly trampled over others in a bid to join the Raikoukai,” she spoke each word as though savoring their weight. “People who have dragged the entire academy into turmoil in the pursuit of admission. People who have lost their qualification to join and, after much anguish, went down the wrong path.”

Sayaka Taniyama, whom she had once faced in a debate and now counted as a friend.

Yuusho Kiryuuin, once an enemy whom she later temporarily joined forces with.

Taiki Kaji, whose circumstances Yuki had once spoken of with a tinge of blue in her voice.

“And people,” Alisa spoke on, “who despite deeply caring for each other... ended up in conflict over who would join the Raikoukai.”

They were, of course... Masachika and Yuki: a brother and sister who loved one another, yet found themselves clashing over who would join the Raikoukai and inherit the Suou family. And Ayano too, caught in between them, equally devoted to both siblings.

And then there was Masachika himself, who still suffered as he wrestled with his own feelings.

Recalling all their faces, Alisa could only harden her eyes as she spoke, driven by a sense of duty that tugged at her heart.

“I... want to create a system in which all of them can join hands and work together. I want to give these candidates—those who had no choice but to compete against and fight each other—the choice to cooperate.”

So that close friends would not have to become rivals. So that, instead of dragging each other down, they could shoot for the Raikoukai together.

“If we can do that, this school will surely become an even better place! Even if there are limits to what a president and vice president can accomplish, to what two people can do alone, imagine having two pairs, three pairs, all possessing the same level of strength: surely we can achieve so much more! This,” Alisa paused, the word hanging in the air as her resolve shone through, “is the type of student council that I want to build!”

Hearing her plea, one that almost sounded like a cry from the heart, the audience finally came to understand the type of student council that Alisa idealized.



The scene of her standing shoulder to shoulder with Sayaka and Nonoa during the first semester's closing ceremony. and the words that Masachika had offered, suggesting to bring Yuki and Ayano into their circle at the time, were evidence to what Alisa was speaking about now: making a new student council, one that the two of them had envisioned back then, the norm at this school.

It was certainly an ambition that was vast... A dreamlike fantasy.

"I had said this during the first semester's closing ceremony: if I could not believe myself as worthy of being student council president, then I will withdraw from the election by my own accord."

It was a resolve that Alisa had once declared, yet one she now sought to overwrite with one even greater.

"I retract these words," she announced, placing one hand over her chest. "Whether I'm worthy or not is irrelevant. I *have* to become the student council president, for the student council that I envision—the Seirei Academy that I envision—will surely be more graceful, more enjoyable, than it is now! And because *I* am the only one who can make that ideal a reality! It is something that only I can do, for I am the only person with a foot in this race running not to join the Raikoukai, but to simply become student council president for the sake of being the student council president!"

Her words were delivered with such an immense force that they seemed to be directed not at the audience, but at herself. It bore testament to her character: someone who sought for her ideals without the approval or sympathy of those who listened.

"I will remain true to this ideal that I have found," Alisa proclaimed, gazing upward with an intense pride. "I will devote nothing but my utmost effort into making it a reality. As for whether someone like me is worthy of becoming the student council president... I'll leave that judgement to all of you. Thank you very much for listening."

Bowing her head, Alisa stepped down from the stage, and yet, even as she began to walk away, all the students remained frozen in place. They had completely lost their abilities to speak, utterly overwhelmed by such a display and could only watch her departure in silence.

It was only after Masachika emerged from the wings to stand beside her in a bow did a few claps finally rise from somewhere within the crowd, gradually growing across the gymnasium into an applause that gently rained down upon them.

Sure, it did not harbor the same sheer volume heard in the ovation that Yuki and Ayano had received, but nobody present cared about that.

Because *everyone* was applauding.

The difference was merely in the nature of the applause.

The ovation directed at Yuki and Ayano had carried a sense of enthusiasm.

The applause now directed at Alisa and Masachika was one of respect.

An applause full of respect for two people walking forward while carrying the weight of an immense ideal: an applause from those who watched over them... From those who could do nothing *but* watch.



In the end, neither pair emerged from the closing ceremony with a clear advantage over the other... But even so, in spite of this, everyone came away sharing a single conviction.

A conviction that either Alisa Kujou or Yuki Suou would become the next student council president. And that no matter which of the two would ultimately claim such a position, Seirei Academy would undoubtedly change.

With the students' anticipation quietly growing stronger... the second semester's closing ceremony came to a close.

[1]: Roughly translates to: “Dear friends, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Masachika Kuze, and I am the student council’s officer for general affairs. Allow me to greet you all in place of your student council presidential candidate, Alisa Kujou.”

Epilogue - A Joint Battle

“Yeaah... This pretty much doesn’t feel right, huh...?”

It was currently after the closing ceremony. Masachika, who had finished helping set up the venue for Yuki’s Christmas party, found himself alone. He stood in front of a mirror in the men’s bathroom, his lips pressed into a thin line.

He wore a suit that he’d bought in the spring for formal occasions. It wasn’t something most ordinary folk would exactly call cheap, but the fact that it was still off-the-rack as opposed to being custom-made most likely qualified it as such by this school’s standards.

Trying to at the very least properly put his hair together, Masachika awkwardly worked hair wax through his stubborn strands, something he never really got used to using. However... no matter how hard he tried, it just wouldn’t stay the way he wanted.

“It had turned out a li’l better when I tried it at home, though...” he muttered.

Scrunching up his face, he racked his brain for what he had done differently, only to realize that he had practiced right after taking a bath.

Huh? Wait, no way... does how clean your hair is actually make that much of a difference?

The unpleasant thought slowly sent his back breaking out in a cold sweat.

No, but, I used to do it just fine for piano recitals and stuff when I was a kid...

Relying on hazy memories from long ago, Masachika continued to fiddle with his hair.

Huh? How did I do it back then again? I’m... pretty sure I did it like this...

Yet, just as you might have thought, it still wouldn't work out. Perhaps simply washing all the wax out and starting over was the smart choice here.

But still, even if he did want to wash his hair, doing it at school was a little... you know? Besides, there wasn't much time left in the first place.

Hol' on, no way... Isn't this pretty... no, seriously bad?

A chill ran down his spine as panic overtook him, his heart pounding right into overdrive.

Aaargh, shit. First the closing ceremony and now this... My lack of prep's too much! Seriously, the hell am I doing!?

Ever since hearing Alisa's campaign promise, Masachika had powered through to this very day on an endless motivation bought on by this so-called "invincible mode" he had fallen into. It was thanks to it that he felt that everything up until yesterday had gone smoothly, whether it was his studies, student council work, or even practice with the wind ensemble club. Yet now, when it came down to the day that actually mattered, the very tunnel vision that had kept him moving—making every step forward feel like undeniable proof that he couldn't stumble—had finally spectacularly come back to bite him.

Aaargh, geez!!!

Clenching a fistful of his hair in a cry of how things simply would not go his way, Masachika tightened his grip until the pain gave him something else to focus on beside the disappointment he felt toward himself.

"Honestly, what on earth are you doing, Kuze?" a voice forced its way through the noise in his head.

It belonged to none other than Yuusho. He had, at some point, waltzed right in, leaning against the restroom wall with his arms folded.

"...Why the hell are *you* even here, man?" Masachika caught his reflection in the mirror, his eyes as flat as a week-old cup of coffee.

"Why, you say? I was just escorting Sumire-neesan; I'm simply here to do my own business, okay?"

“Yeah, sure.”

“That aside...” Yuusho shrugged, a smirk tugging at his mouth, “you two sure have made quiiiite the grand campaign promise, hm?”

The derisive edge in his voice matched the mockery in his eyes.

“Do you both *seriously* believe you can make it happen?”

Masachika didn’t so much as blink. “It ain’t about whether we can. We *will*.”

“...Hmmm?”

His firm declaration was met with a hum so ambiguous that it made it impossible to tell whether Yuusho bought it or not.

“Oh well, that’s another matter in itself...” Yuusho made a languid sweep of his hand, squinting as he moved his eyes up to Masachika’s head. “What’s with that hair of yours? Surely a gentleman ought to be able to style his own hair, don’t you think? And yet...”

Stopping to scrutinize Masachika’s hair disaster once more, he dramatically raised an eyebrow.

“.....”

It was a gesture so pompous that Masachika would have normally fired back at without a moment of hesitation. But with no room to argue this time, he simply let the silence answer for him.

Seeing his quick and yielding surrender, Yuusho gave an exaggerated shake of his head, pushing himself off the wall with an exasperated sigh.

“Oh dear, oh dear. I can’t very well let a man who’s supposed to be my rival show up to a party with hair like *that*, can I?”

Since when did I become your rival? The question sprung in Masachika’s mind. *And you’re the one with weird hair.*

Still, realizing what Yuusho was about to do, he swallowed his jabs, letting them die behind his teeth.

“Here, lower your head a little.”

Doing as he was told, Masahika bent his knees slightly, allowing Yuusho to shovel a small amount of hair wax with his fingers before running them through his hair, closely observing the reflection in the mirror. He worked the wax in with confidence, giving volume to his hair and shaping it with remarkable ease.

“Hmm... Oh well, we ideally should’ve started with blowing your hair dry but... I suppose this does it for now, huh?”

Though he still didn’t seem all that satisfied, Yuusho finally took his hands to his pockets. It only barely passed by his own standards, but it looked noticeably better than whatever Masahika had been able to conjure up at home.

“...Thanks man. I’ll say that honestly this time, Kiryuuin.”

“Is that so? Well in that case, make sure you can do it yourself next time, okay?”

“...Yeah. Seriously, thank you.”

Thanking Yuusho once more and washing his hands, Masachika hurried toward Class 1-B.

“Phew... Thank God. She’s not here yet.”

Sliding open the classroom’s door, he let out a sigh of relief, his shoulders finally loosening after observing that the partner that he’d been expecting had yet to arrive. He glanced at the clock. 3:40 p.m.

The party starts at 4:30 while doors open at... wait, it was 3:30, wasn’t it? I should prolly head over soon... No, wait, Alya and I aren’t even part of the event staff; we don’t gotta be there early...

With that thought in mind, Masachika looked out over the school grounds, still unable to quite settle down. Elegantly dressed students arrived one after another beyond the front gate in the distance.

Oooh... Just what you’d expect from a school full of rich kids. Everyone’s reaaaally going all out here, huh...?

Looking down at his off-the-rack suit, Masachika once again felt as if he'd wandered off into another world. Still, there was no point in crying over spilt milk. He had to, at the very least, carry himself with confidence. And just as he recalled the etiquette and bearing drilled into him from his days back in the Suou household...

Buzz.

Vibration rattled against his leg.

“Hm?”

It stopped after about two more pulses. Fishing out his phone from his pocket, Masachika made out a single message from Alisa.

Come pick me up.

“Come pick you up...? What, from the student council office?”

All the girls on the student council—including Alisa—were all preparing for the party in the student council room. That naturally and obviously included changing. It made Masachika stand frozen on the spot, hesitating for a moment over whether it was really okay to go there just because she'd asked him to.

“I mean... surely everyone's done by now if she's telling me to come, no?” he murmured, his words sounding more like an argument he was making to himself. “But like, why does she need *me* to pick her up...?”

Cocking his head in confusion, he left the classroom and made his way over to the student council office.

Arriving in no time, he knocked on the door.

“Yes,” a voice answered from the inside. He swung the door open.

“Alya? Did something hap... pen...?”

The question withered away the instant he laid his eyes on the girl standing inside.

“Ah,” Alisa looked up at him with a smile. “Thank you, Masachika-kun.”

“.....”

She was dressed in an evening gown, and her hair had been pulled back into a braided updo. She looked even more mature than usual, helped along by the light touch of makeup she wore. More than anything... she was so stunningly beautiful that it robbed him of his words.

Huh...? She... feels a little... different, somehow?

The impression that struck Masachika felt completely different from when he had seen her in a dress at the cultural festival's after party. And it surely wasn't because of her hairstyle or makeup...

It was instead the difference in the radiance that shone from within Alisa herself.

Specifically that... sort of fragile... or rather vulnerable side to her...? It's as if it's gone...

Her ethereal, almost celestial aura that usually seemed to bloom around her had completely dissipated, a dignified grace that blossomed from confidence and pride unfurling in its place. It was as though a fairy had descended to earth and became human... And it was precisely because of that reason that her beauty felt even all the more detached from reality.

“Masachika-kun?” The very fairy Masahika had been dazing over broke the spell he had fallen under.

“Ah, no, uh...” he stumbled over his words. “Ah, um... it's just, you look absolutely beautiful.”

“O-oh? Thank you... Um, Masachika-kun, you look great too, you know?”

Perhaps realizing that his unusually flustered demeanor meant that he was truly speaking from the heart, Alisa bashfully averted her gaze. Her sudden shyness brought a faint smile to his lips, easing the butterflies that had been fluttering in his stomach.

“Haaah...” he let a sigh of relief escape. “Thanks.”

Taking a moment to clear his throat, he repeated the question he'd asked earlier.

“Uhhh, did something happen? You said to come pick you up...”

“Eh? Ah, about that...”

Twirling her hair around her finger, Alisa bashfully averted her gaze once more.

【I just... wanted you to be the first to see me...】 she murmured under her breath.

Gah!

Those unbearably endearing words, spoken in Russian as they slipped from the lips of a girl so beautiful she seemed beyond this world nearly made Masachika choke. Even so, he somehow managed to hold his composure by a thread, delivering his customary response.

“What was that?”

“I said it’s a gentleman’s duty to pick up and escort a lady, is it not?”

“Ah, that’s right, isn’t it?”

Hearing the very word “gentleman” spoken from Alisa’s lips, Masachika quietly gathered himself, drawing upon every bit of etiquette the Suou household had drilled into him as a kid as he gracefully offered her his arm.

“Shall we?”

“Y-yes.”

Maybe a little intimidated by his smooth, unexpectedly polished movements, Alisa timidly reached her arm out...

Only to, for some reason, pull it back.

“Hm? Alya?” Masachika cast a puzzled glance her way.

She gave no response and lowered her eyes, dodging his gaze as her thoughts seemed to drift somewhere far away.

“Today is... Christmas Eve, isn’t it...?”

Her words were hesitant and her voice shook, each syllable catching in her throat.

Masachika could only blink once. “Yeah.”

He cocked his head to its side, searching her face as to why she was bringing something so obvious up now, while the very girl stood before him and held her silence.

One second turned to two, and then to several.

Then, all at once, she raised her head, holding him firmly in an oddly unwavering gaze.

“Step outside for a bit!”

“Huh? Wha—?”

“Just do it!”

Without warning, she shoved him out of the room and slammed the door shut, leaving Masachika standing there with his mouth hanging open.

“U-uhhh...?”

“Wait there! Whatever happens, don’t open the door until I call you! No matter who comes!”

“Uh... okay.”

Had he somehow rubbed her the wrong way? The thought crossed his mind for a moment, but he quickly dismissed it. It didn’t seem to be the case.

Still, despite not having the foggiest idea what was going on, the lady here had assigned him the role of doorman, so he obediently followed her orders.

A little over ten minutes later...

“Y-you’re okay to come in now.”

“Oka—”

“Ah! There’s no one else, right!?”

“There isn’t, but...”

“A-alright... Come in.”

Hearing the stiff tension beneath her words from the other side of the door, Masachika cautiously reached for the handle.

“W-what’s up with you...?”

Slowly, he opened the door. Alisa stood on the other side.

Merely laying eyes upon her robbed him of his words again, the impact of her beauty not diminishing by the slightest even though it was already his second time seeing her like this...

Only now, the dress she wore had changed completely.

“!?!?”

It was now as inky as the night sky, its dark surface broken by corsages of blue roses that seemed to bloom like fireworks crackling across the horizon. The obsidian fabric contrasted her pristine white skin that shimmered in the light, boldly exposed like freshly fallen snow beneath the winter sky...

Or rather, her boobs!!! More importantly, those were her boobs!!!

They’re huuuge! Gah, where did her bra even go!?

Barely forcing those thoughts right back down his throat, Masachika hurriedly reached behind himself and slammed the door shut. Yet, even as he did, he simply could not tear his eyes away from you know what: those magnificent peaks that boldly boinged outward and the alluring valley that formed between them.

No, no, calm down, Masachika. Alya’s not that busty compared to Masha-san or whatnot if we’re being objective here. It’s just her shoulders and waist are unbelievably slender that it makes her look larger than she really is. Calm down, they’re not that big if you look at it...

Still standing there frozen on the spot, Masachika continued to let his eyes wander.

Who am I kidding, they're freaking huge. She's, like, basically straight out of a manga or something, ain't she?

Even after an attempt to analyze the situation as rationally as possible, the sight before him was so mind-boggling that he was at a complete loss for what to do.

Lightly tugging at the hem of her skirt, Alisa shot a teasing smirk his way as she struck a coquettish pose.

“!!!?”

Her gleaming white leg gradually came into view... and then her left as well. A suuuper surprise.

No, seriously, where did her bra really go!?

Unable to find where their straps were supposed to be, Masachika's ears filled with a scream he refused to let escape.

It was strange. The dress objectively covered far more than a swimsuit ever would, yet the crucial areas a normal swimsuit would have served to keep protected felt as fragile and bare as armor merely made of paper. It could only be described as an imbalance that dangled his brain on the edge of bugging out.

Alisa's grin curved upwards even more.

【Your present is... M... E...♡】

“.....”

Her dress, though dark as a moonless ocean, gleamed with a bewitching sheen as it traced along her waist as it arched sharply like a bow. It emphasized the curves brought about by her figure sharply, as if it existed solely to frame and accentuate her supreme beauty. Just catching a few glimpses of the patches of her pure white flesh it left out exposed felt illegal and so... alluringly sensual that it threatened to take Masachika's breath away.

Such a sight, combined with the sheer devastation of her sweetly whispered woo in Russian, was more than enough to leave him beyond flushed like a rose caught beneath the summer sun. His mind simply froze.

“.....”

“.....”

“.....”

Just how long did the two of them remain staring at each other like that?

Before she knew it, Alisa, too, glowed with a faint flush that gradually stretched from her collarbone toward her chest...



Ah, she's got blood flowing through her. Wooow, so she really is a living human after all, huuuh?

While Masachika coped with an absurd comment that drifted through a corner of his mind, Alisa—her fair skin now stained a soft cherry pink—spun around on her heel.

“I’m going to die.”

Her tone was frighteningly serious, so no-nonsense that it practically punched Masachika right out of his trance, making him jump right on the spot.

“H-hey! Wait a sec!” he quickly yanked her hand, stopping her as she started toward the window. “Don’t go dyin’ dressed like that!!!”

“Dressed like that.” Words that perhaps made Alisa suddenly aware of what she was wearing. Frantically covering her chest, she shot a sharp glare Masachika’s way, a complete reversal from just moments ago.

“D-don’t stare at me like that!”

“You’re asking the impossible...” Masachika let out a long sigh to what was quite simply an utterly unreasonable complaint.

Or rather, you’re not even really hiding them properly anyway... And honestly, trying to actually makes it feel more ero... Ahem.

To begin with, the dress made her side-boob situation basically a complete disaster if she was concerned with keeping herself covered.

So, like, even if you try to cover it like that...

Wisely keeping that observation to himself, Masachika pressed a finger to his temple.

“Uhhh, so...” he flicked his wrist toward her. “What’s the whole deal with this here?”

“Th-the handicrafts club, um, basically forced it... on me...”

Masachika pinched the bridge of his nose. “Those girls again...”

Hearing the details from Alisa, it all began once the members of the handicrafts club had heard that the members of the student council would be attending the Christmas party, apparently pleading every female member to accept one of their dresses to the point of worship.

So the reason why it fits her so perfectly is 'cause they'd already gotten her measurements for that whole crossdressing thing earlier, huh?

“Huh?” Masachika put the pieces together. “So that means they got to Masha-san and Sarashina-senpai too?”

“...Theirs are there, okay?”

Following Alisa's gaze, Masachika spotted four garment bags lined up on the sofa. He only needed a quick glance to see that they looked full. As expected, everyone else had decided to go with their own dresses.

I mean, that figures, yeah? Masachika looked Alisa up and down. *Alya's one looking like this means Masha-san's would've probably been even more insane, so...*

“Masachika-kun?” Alisa fixed him with an icy stare.

“Y-yes! What is it?”

“I-I told you to quit staring at me!”

Raising her left hand, she firmly swatted his face to the side, drawing a harsh, involuntary grunt from deep in his throat.

“Guh!”

Palm still pushed on his cheek, she forced him toward the door.

Fearing his neck might snap if things continued like this, Masachika whipped his head to the side before he could meet her eyes again.

Only after he stumbled away did Alisa finally pull her hand back.

“I-I figured I'd try it on since they made it for me, but... Geez! As I thought, I'm changing back! I'm changing back, so get out!”

“...Okaaay.”

With Alisa somehow having the patience to provide an excuse, Masachika left the room in spite of his heart lightly tugging at him to turn back.

Now standing with his back against the door outside, he let out a long, deep sigh.

I mean, I'm somehow... relieved that Alya's still Alya, I guess...

The way Alisa held her shoulders during the closing ceremony had already suggested the bearing of a student council president. And then there was the way she stood in front of him just moments ago, so breathtakingly beautiful and draped in pure elegance that using just words to describe her charm felt insulting. Witnessing her in both of those ways had made Masachika feel as though she had somehow moved to a place far beyond his reach...

Yet in the end, it had apparently never been like that at all.

No, but... maybe it's only a matter of time.

The vigor in Alisa's eyes flashed across his mind as he relived watching her speech from the wings of the stage just a few hours earlier. She had been pressed by an immense pressure, facing the expectations of the audience that had been pushed to its absolute limit after his own introduction. And yet, even when blinded under such a spotlight, she had spoken of her ideals boldly, not hinting at even the slightest bit of hesitation all the way to the end.

There's no way I... hell, not even Yuki... could've pulled something like that.

It was a conviction that Masachika genuinely swore by. It was all he was sure about at this moment: he could never measure up to her.

He had to admit it. Alisa's rate of growth, the speed at which she moved forward, had far surpassed anything that he could have ever imagined. It was a pace that was, without a doubt, faster than... even his own.

“.....”

Just how much longer would he be able to stay by her side, you may ask? Experience, connections, communication, they were all things that Masachika had a slight edge over. They were reasons as to why she still needed him as someone who could support her.

However... little by little, Alisa was reaching a point where she no longer needed him even for that. And that was what today's closing ceremony had made crystal clear.

Oh well, all I can do is keep hanging on, huh? Masachika reassured himself, as if cutting off his thoughts.

He had already decided to stop hanging his head over his own inadequacies, realizing that dwelling on them only kept him standing still. Even if it meant that the day eventually came when she left behind...

Because until then, all he could do was keep trailing her footsteps with everything he had. No matter the consequences.

Clack. The sound of the latch clicking open sent a jolt through Masachika as the door swung open from behind him.

"...Sorry to keep you waiting," Alisa peeked through.

"...Yeah."

She had changed back into her original evening gown, fidgeting as she awkwardly failed to meet his gaze...

With the knot in his stomach finally unravelling, yet a quiet sting of disappointment taking its place, Masachika once again offered her his arm.

"Well then, shall we?"

"...Yes."

Nodding, Alisa properly entwined her arm around his at last. The two of them slowly began to walk.

Waltzing through the hallway and descending a flight of stairs, they exited through the door at the end of the corridor, heading toward the gymnasium where the party was being held. Despite there still being some time before it officially began, the lively atmosphere overflowing from the venue suggested that quite a crowd had already gathered.

Inhaling the scene from afar, Masachika found himself stopped in his tracks before he even realized...

“Hm?” Alisa drifted her eyes up to him. “What’s wrong?”

“...Nothing.”

His denial came almost reflexively, but the reason was obvious. His familiar sense of self-deprecation: an inferiority complex that bore its fangs once again upon the realization they were about to draw the eyes around them as he entered with the girl by his side.

I’m not worthy of being by her side as her partner.

We simply don’t match no matter how you look at it.

These were the thoughts that kept him rooted to the spot.

No, I mean... that reaaally is a given by just looking at us, huh...? Haaah, it’s time like these I really wish I was still in that whole invincible mode.

Completely unaware of the mockery that clung onto him like a curse he couldn’t shake, Alisa—who had been looking at him with a confused look tinged with concern—flashed him a mischievous smile.

“Could it be... you didn’t want to show me in my dress to anyone else?”

A question so overly full of herself that it would’ve been easy to laugh off had it come from any other person.

Masachika could only offer a wry, helpless smile. “...Yeah, I guess so. I s’pose you’re just so beautiful that I can’t help but want to keep you all to myself, Alya.”

Alisa jolted backward, her entire body tensing in sudden shock.

“...Really?” she squeaked, catching herself far too late. “Well... I suppose I don’t mind... if that’s the case? But even so...”

Unable to bring herself to finish her words, she brushed her hair back in an attempt to hide her embarrassment, all the while Masachika could only furrow his brows, his expression clouded with confusion as he tried to trace where her words were leading to.

Shooting a few sideways glances toward him, Alisa spoke again.

“If what you want is to dance together alone, like at the cultural festival’s after party... then I’m fine with that too, you know? I’m the one being escorted, after all. I’ll go along with your lead.”

Her words, declared so boldly, conveyed her absolute trust and willingness to fall right into his arms... It instantly blew away all the sense of inferiority that had wrapped its thorns around Masachika’s heart.

Yeah, she’s right, huh...? I can’t afford to be tormented by this stupid inferiority complex if she’s saying something like this. I really ain’t no man if I can’t hold my head high here, am I?

Feeling a surge of omnipotence coursing through his veins, Masachika felt his invincible mode reactivate once again.

“Thanks for having that much faith in me,” he shot her a fearless grin. “...But honestly, if anything, I actually feel like showing you off to everyone right now.”

“Oh my, is that so?” Alisa’s lips curved up into a provocative smirk. “Well then, let’s hold our heads high and give everyone something to look at, shall we?”

Even the sheer insolence in her tone was ridiculous. Masachika could only chuckle, throwing his hands up in defeat.

“Alrighty, shall we go, my princess?”

“Yes. Let’s, shall we?”



Мой принц.
(My prince.)

Author's Afterword

Hello, SunSunSun here, the original author. As I had also written in the afterword of Volume 8 of the manga adaptation, I, SunSunSun, quit my company job in August to become a full-time author. Woooooh! It reaaaally ain't exactly something I should be celebrating, though!!!

No, but all things considered, I guess I'd been a part-time author for about four and a half years, huh? Even I would call that a preeetty long time, wouldn't I? So then, why did I keep this as just a side-gig for so long? I actually get asked that quite often, so I'll answer it here: the reason was because I wanted to be prepared to be able to quit being a professional novelist at any time. That's really how it was, you know? To put it more bluntly, it's because I had neither the confidence or resolve to live the rest of my life as a novelist. I guess you'd get away with describing it like that, right? As I had written in the afterwords of Volumes 1 and 2, I was originally part of the whole “just enjoying Shousetsuka ni Narou”^[1] crowd, and never once actually thought that I'd be able to make my professional debut as a novelist.

So, embarrassingly enough, even when my debut had been set in stone, I actually had none of that whole “Alrighty, I'll be making a livin' solely on writing novels from here on out!” type of determination, you know? However, with Roshidere growing into a much bigger series that I could have ever imagined after, I unexpectedly found myself becoming an extremely busy author. But even so, that didn't make me suddenly say things like, “Alright, guess I'll go all in with being a full-time novelist, huh?” or anything... So that's why, even though I was super swamped, I just couldn't bring myself to quit my company job. In the end, what changed my mind was hearing that there were actually quite the number of authors and manga artists who went in full-time for a while, before then going back to being company employees during their forties and whatnot, you know? It meant that you didn't actually have to make a living through solely writing for the rest of your life just because you became a full-time author... Realizing that made it seem actually sort of obvious, and I thought, well, I guess maybe I don't need

to force myself to keep this double career way of living, huh? So, yes, in other words, I still don't have the confidence or resolve to continue being a novelist for the rest of my life even now. Perhaps I'll be back working as some company employee again in a few years from now, but for the time being, I think I'll stick to writing Roshidere while consuming more material for creative input and the like—something that was pretty difficult to manage when I still had this whole double career thing. Hopefully I'll be able to draw inspiration from all of that and even try writing a new series... That's the sort of thing I've got in my mind right now, so I think I'll try my best to work as a full-time and professional novelist for as long as I can.

Now then, I'll leave my pointless ramblings about my own life at that. I've got an actual promotional announcement that I've been unusually asked to make, so let's do that, shall we? Yep, unlike my usual promos that nobody actually asked for, this one came right from the editorial department. What is it, you may ask...?

In 2026, an official body pillow cover will finally go on sale to commemorate Roshidere's fifth anniversary!!!

Yeah, that's basically it. "What d'you mean 'finally'?" "Don'tcha already have one?" I can already feel those questions flying my way, so let me explain what I mean. So, you know how the ones that already exist are ones with anime illustrations, am I right? This will be different from those: a body pillow cover featuring new illustrations drawn by the original illustrator, Momoco-sensei! Okay, so, why finally, you may ask...? Welp, from what I've heard, body pillow covers are among the more expensive merch officially released by KADOKAWA^[2], and it's precisely for that reason that they're apparently only made for a select few series... Well, but, now that I think about it, I've not actually bought a body pillow cover myself, you know? I don't even have an actual body pillow to put it on in the first place, nor the space to hang it up on some wall for display either, so, yeah... Anyway, more than that, hey, you there! The one thinking that buying a body pillow's kinda embarrassing! Yes, you! I completely getcha, but I can also assure you you won't have to worry about that when it comes to this Roshidere body pillow cover this time around. And here's why! Technically speaking, what you'd be getting this time ain't no body pillow cover, but a novel that will come with said body pillow cover!!!

...You're probably wondering what on earth I'm talking about, but I'll say it one more time since it's important. What's being released isn't a body pillow cover that comes with a bonus novel, but rather a novel that comes with a body pillow cover! What sort of novel, you ask? Well, a newly written story that matches the illustration on said body pillow cover. It's about 10,000 Japanese characters long^[3], and, of course, I've written it myself.

"No, the novel's the bonus and not the other way around if it's only 10,000 characters, ain't it not?" "The body pillow cover is definitely accounting for the most of what we're gonna be paying for, don'tcha think?" Yeah, I can already hear all you people objecting like that. But still, at the end of the day, it is first and foremost a novel that comes with a body pillow cover. KADOKAWA is officially taking this position; there can be no mistake about it. They'd be able to sell it at bookstores nationwide by insisting on that, after all. And what's more, you consumers can easily pick it up with a look on your faces that just says, "I'm just buyin' a book; what of it?" It's groundbreaking and genius, I'll have you know. That's really how it is. The latter part's just how I'm interpreting it, though... So when the time comes for its release, please, everyone, go and put on your shamelessly innocent faces and buy it as if you're sayin' "I'm strictly here to just buy a book, okay...? Oh, the bonus is huge? Well, this kinda thing happens sometimes, y'know? Commonly with, like, magazines and stuff." ...No, but, in all seriousness, the price is what it is, so I can't really casually urge you all with a simple "Please buy it", right? So please treat this as merely an announcement that this specific product is coming out soon. As for all the details—including its price and illustrations—please wait for further updates from Roshidere's official Twitter account (I am absolutely *not* calling it X; as for why, feel free to refer to the afterword of Volume 4 of the manga adaptation). Alright, that's the promo I was asked to do wrapped up!

Well then, I've still got some pages left, so let's talk 'bout boobs or something, shall we? Yep, I'm referring to the oh-so curious phenomenon of Chisaki and Nonoa somehow tending to get their breasts buffed when I supervise the illustrations for our game and other merchandise, while Ayano tends to get nerfed in that area and the height department. It's... something I find strange, you know...? Officially speaking, Ayano's supposed to be the one with the largest breasts among the main first-year characters excluding Alya. As I

thought, I guess it's a matter of character image, hm? Maybe Nonoa tends to get her breasts buffed because she's supposed to be a model with a good figure, while Ayano tends to get hers nerfed because of the image or idea that she's Yuki's servant, and that servants are supposed to be "more restrained" in their presence than their masters. Could that be it, I wonder? That being said, if that's the case, then I don't really get why Chisaki tends to get hers made larger... Because, you guys also get this strong image of short-haired super-strong female characters being more slender, right? Oh well, even though I'm saying she tends to get buffed, it's really only on the level of going from being more slender to average-sized. Huh? Sayaka? Yeaaaah, she's almost always never buffed. She's always remarkably quite restrained in that depar—oh, whoa. Is that a murderous intent I sense?

Ah, just so I'm clear, this isn't me making some kind of statement like, "There are so many dang illustrators not drawing my characters according to their original measurements; it's a real pain, you know? *Haaaaah*, good grief, good grief." I really don't mind it at all, and if anything, as the original author, it really does sound like I'm actually getting a pretty good deal out of being able to see all sorts of different variations to them, right? Every time, I'll find myself muttering something along the lines of "Oh, Nonoa's breasts do look sort of big this time, huh? I get it, this has its merits too... but how unfortunate. That's far beyond you" before asking them to make the tweaks. By the way, when it comes to character figures in particular, Alya also tends to have her breasts buffed. She sometimes actually gets buffed so much that I even have to ask for a second round of tweaking with the thought, "I've had them fix it, but they're still too big, huh...?" Hey, you there, if you're sittin' there thinkin', "The hell are ya correcting it for? Give us that size, ya blockhead of a bastard," I applaud you for being so honest about your desires, but let's calm down a li'l.

Now then, I've got no more pages left, so I'll move on to the announcements. First again, to Suzuki-sama, who took charge of editing this volume as well. Thank you very much for all your precise advice and thoughtful support. Next, to Momoco-sensei, who once again brought this series to life with an absolutely incredible lineup of illustrations for this volume. Thank you so very much, as always. And continuing, to Tenamachi-sensei, whose manga adaptation has recently finished covering the lore of Volume 2 of the original light novels. Thank you

very much, and I appreciate all your hard work. I look forward to your continued support as you start to cover Volume 3 of the original light novels. Lastly, I would like to express a gratitude—too great to even be wrapped by a sarashi^[4]—to Miyagawa-sama, my lead editor whom I am always indebted to; Katou-sama, who oversees merchandising; everyone involved in this series' publishing; and to all my readers who have been reading Roshidere. Thank you very much! Here's to meeting again in the next volume's afterword!



“ロシデレ”
よろしくお願ひします

Mamo

[1]: Basically the full name for syosetu.com, a pretty popular Japanese self-publishing web novel website.

[2]: As in like the ones with illustrations from the original illustrator of the source material, as opposed to like, in this case, the ones done for the anime (I think they're made and sold by Movic/Animate?).

[3]: About 10% or so of a normal volume.

[4]: A traditional Japanese white cloth that women use to wrap their chests in. What is it with this guy and boobs in this afterword dawg.

Fan Translator's Note

Yo. Thanks for reading our fan translation of Roshidere Volume 11! We hope you enjoyed it. Feel free to take the time to rate the series on [Novel Updates](#) if you did!

I'd like to express my gratitude to Flaze and gorg for proofreading, Indi for helping us with typesetting the cover and colored illustrations, and to Iviera for coloring the chapter illustrations.

First of all, I want to apologize for how long I took with this volume. As I had explained on many occasions with different chapter releases, I have been really, *really*, **really**, busy over the past year. I am sorry for the delay, and hope that the [effort](#) and [quality](#) we put into our projects can make up for it.

Anyway, I kinda found this Volume pretty mid I guess? It was mostly just filler and felt more transitional to set up V12. I am honestly also getting pretty tired of Sun³'s mediocre prose and narration. Those of you who have read this series in its original Japanese might have noticed how he often suffers from very bland and direct writing—such as only telling and never showing—to the point where most of the time it's as if he's writing a manga/anime script as opposed to an actual novel.

Sure, it has been fun for me to rewrite/rephrase his narration with my own creative writing—such as making it more show and tell, adding more descriptive flair, or enhancing the imagery to convey the emotions of characters in a more impactful manner—especially with this volume's epilogue; I went way beyond than what I usually already do. But at this point, it's honestly gotten way too mundane for me.

One thing I will say, however, is that—perhaps because Sun³'s writing style is more akin to an anime/manga script than an actual novel—the dialogue in Roshidere is very colorful and vibrant. From trying to accurately convey their tones and the way they speak, to dissecting and carrying over all the nuances in the words and expressions they use—all different between each character, and even within individual characters depending on the context or setting—translating it all has been very enjoyable for me. I will miss it.

Which leads me onto my next point. Unlike Sun³, this will be the last time I address you all at the end of a Roshidere volume.



That's right, I am dropping the series that had roped me into this stupid hobby of mine. This has actually been a decision I had made all the way back in December of 2025, stemming from the realization that my increasingly busy life due to my own personal goals and ambitions was becoming more and more incompatible with fan translating two ongoing series.

That being said, I am glad to say that I will be passing the torch on to our affiliates, [Secre Translations](#). They will be picking up Roshidere from V12 and onwards, so make sure to join their [Discord](#) for further updates and news. Some of you might already know them, but to those who don't, I assure you this series will be in good hands. I've known Secre for a pretty long time now, and we often discuss and help each other with our respective fan translation projects.

Volume 12 is supposed to release sometime around October, so here's hoping it will be a banger. Again, I won't be catching you guys there, so please anticipate it and any other future fan translated volumes from [Secre Translations](#). And to all you shitty MTL spam groups looking at this as an opportunity to snipe, do know I am more than prepared to

make another [document](#) and petition for your removal from Novel Updates (and thus basically the entire English speaking Japanese light novel community) like I had done so successfully before.

Anyway, I will still be fan translating [Gimai Seikatsu](#) for the indefinite future, so feel free to catch any future updates on our [website](#) and our [Discord](#)! I've gotta continue locking in to finish V16 and hop on V17 (please Ghost, slow down 🥺).

As always, please support the author by buying the [official translation](#)!

If you haven't already, please take the time to read [this document](#) to stay informed about the differences between a proper translation and MTL spam/slop (or ones done by an ESL speaker).

Regarding this issue, if you care about our translations (or light novels in general) then ***please contribute to our cause by spreading the document and message as far as possible***. Together, we can raise awareness, inform the ignorant, and ensure that the light novel fan translating community becomes a more transparent space: one that prioritizes reader comfort and experience above all else.

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